

Prophet of the Grace of Ba'al

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Prophet of the Grace of Ba'al

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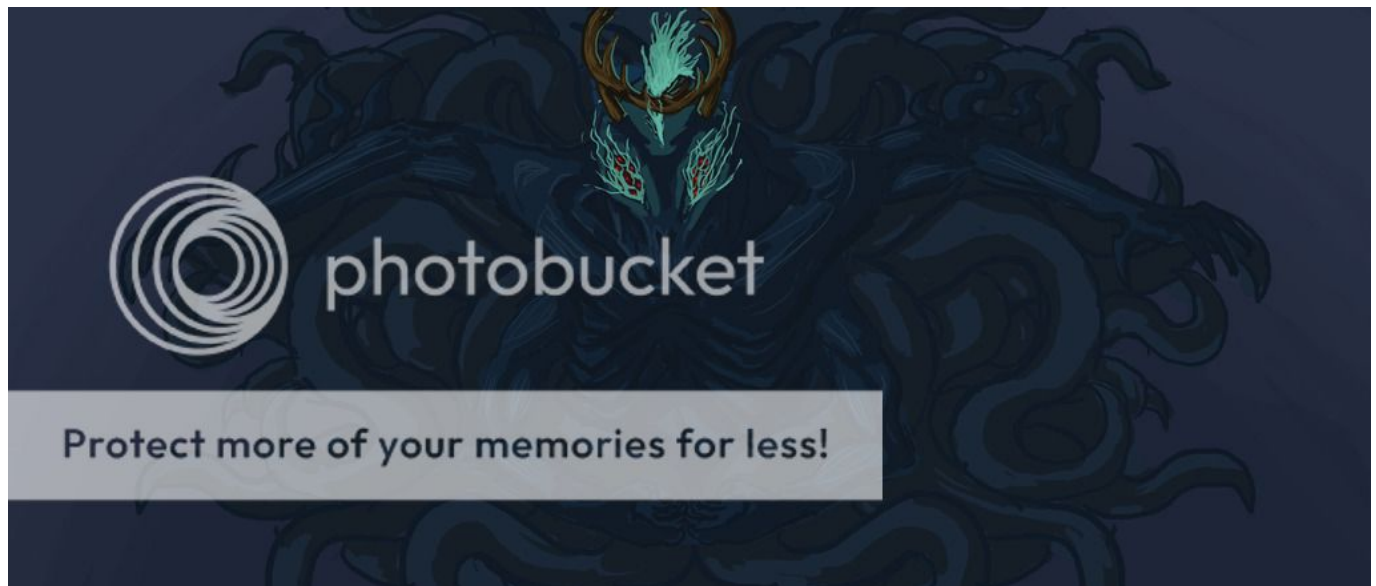
Summary

Summary: Hannibal/A Study in Emerald crossover. Gods walk the earth. Humanity is prey. A myriad of beings have been bred from the union of two worlds that should never have met. Will Graham's gift makes him useful investigating crimes visited on these Godlings by mortals who hark back to days before their Coming, but it also marks him as a target. Jack Crawford's protection will not be enough to save him from the poisonous interest of a true Deity.

Notes

Unfortunately contact with my artist for this was lost, so all artwork by me.

Chapter 1



In the troubled times since the millennium's passage, a home invasion is not out of the ordinary. With the weight of strange and changing stars bearing down on them, the open void above that looks out onto an unfriendly night not kind to mortal souls, humanity has grown ever more violent, more reckless, more impassioned and inflamed by alien desires. The much-quoted protection that the ruling hand – or tentacle, or other incomprehensible limb – of Royalty provides against the uncaring dark and loneliness of the universe has seemed to wane. People have lost themselves. Their minds have become twisted, some in ways more violent than others.

No, all in all, the scene that Homicide Detective Will Graham looks upon now would, *should*, be simple enough. And it might have been if the victims were human.

The waveforms of splattered blood that mark their glorious arcs over floor and wall are not arterial red but ichor green, in all the shades and hues that the iridescent fluids of the Royal lines can show to mortal eyes. Those of their own kind might perceive far stranger wavelengths. Not that the eldritch lineage is particularly strong with this couple. The subtlety of the abnormalities of form and anatomy reveal them as being thin-blooded, much watered down. As close to the mortal masses as makes no difference, particularly when compared to those ancient and powerful Gods who have ruled the Kingdoms of Men for nine hundred years past. These beings would not have lived much beyond their twelfth decade if they had continued on uninterrupted.

At least their killer is human, revealed in spots and splatters of red dripped from minor wounds, in the drying mess of semen. Will Graham has one small blessing in his gift of empathy; even if he tries he cannot connect with the minds of Royal lineage. Not that he has ever made many attempts to try. They do not think in the ways of mortals, and he has no wish to start foaming at the mouth and shouting nonsense syllables or babbling in ancient tongues as his mind breaks itself in two trying to comprehend that which no-one has ever been meant to comprehend.

He walks through the steps of the crime, reading actions in the fall of a corpse, the spewing spoor left in a bullet's trail. This unsub has some familiarity with the oddities of the Old Ones, knowing which chants would deactivate the warped soapstone statue that stands as a guardian above the

threshold. A distress beacon, briefly used, then disregarded. The perpetrator has been watching them for some time.

“This was not a crime born from hatred, not in the way it might seem,” Will says, standing now before the body of Mrs Marlowe— human enough to have only a human name. “This man isn’t a Restorationist, he has no strong political views at all. And it must *be* a man, and a strong one at that. Even using cold iron bullets, they didn’t go easily.” There was a struggle on the stair. Emerald blood smeared in abstract patterns over walls, steps and banisters.

“These acts... they were almost worshipful, in some way. He’s yearning after something. He doesn’t *despise* their bloodline but he wants to stand over it, have mastery over it...”

The sweet spot of concentration that his recitation requires is shattered, suddenly, by the noisy creak of an opening door and new, unfamiliar footsteps. He re-orientates, re-enters the here and now. The living room of the small suburban home is filling up with strangers in dark jackets, three letters stamped over their shoulder-blades in English script and Runic. They are from the FBI. It appears these two Godlings were more important than the mix of their blood would make them seem.

“Everybody out,” a heavy-set, dark-skinned man shouts. Or... perhaps not a man. There is an ink-stained, woody quality to his flesh that is not quite human, despite features and body language that are not uncomfortable to look upon. Will Graham tries, briefly, to read him through the solidity of his shoulders, the irritation sparking in the backs of his eyes, the powerful, decisive punctuation of sharp stabs of his fingers directing Virginia PD out of the house. A naturally impatient man, forceful, feeling emotions deeply but not easily showing them, and most importantly, comprehensible.

Whatever Royal blood this man has is like that of the Marlowes’; far back, watered down. Safe.

Satisfied, Will makes to follow the crime scene technicians out the door, only to be stopped by a thick, muscular arm across his chest.

“Not you,” the minor Godling says. Glancing down so as to avoid meeting his eyes, Will notes the patch on his jacket that identifies him as Agent J. Crawford. “You’re Will Graham, right?”

Will nods. He hopes his downcast gaze is interpreted merely as an appropriate degree of deference to one of the Blood, not as fear, or worse, something approaching the truth. Those who come from Elder stock have a deep fascination with humans who think in unusual ways, be this the creativity of the artist or poet, the brilliance of the scientist, or the difficulty in understanding other people that has always been Will’s personal... delectability.

His empathy, acute as it is, works better when analysing the past. In the moment he can easily take in too much information, run into difficulties processing, become overwhelmed, lose himself. His sense of self has always been a little insubstantial, subject to the whims of his abilities. To Royalty, this would make him perfect prey. He has swum beneath their radar for this long, through being careful and a good dose of luck, but he knows it cannot last forever.

“I’ve heard about you,” J. Crawford muses. He has a deep voice, rich, with an edge of strange timbres that ought not come from mortal throats. “They say there’s no-one better at interpreting a crime scene, at getting inside the head of human criminals.”

“I’m sure they say a lot of things,” Will replies, deflecting.

The Godling makes a thoughtful noise, a hum that vibrates through Will's chest. "I should introduce myself," he says suddenly, pretence at changing the subject. "My name is Jack Crawford, and I head up the Behavioural Analysis Unit at Quantico. My team handles crimes against the Royal line, by humans or by others of the Blood. If the whispers of the rumour-mill are true, I could use someone with your abilities on my team."

He says it gently, with the illusion that Will has anything like a choice. The pressure of his arm, still lightly resting over his heart, even through layers of clothing is slightly too cool to be natural. There isn't much for Will to deliberate inside his head. His future has just narrowed down to a single straight line.

"What would you want me to do?"

Skip ahead some two years. Will Graham gazes out into a darkened room at half a hundred bodies, only some of which are warm, and only a few of which have the standard number of limbs, or eyes, or internal organs. Some of the students have gazes that glow red or green or amber as they follow his slow pace back and forth, flick to the images projected onto the screen behind him. Teaching is a small part of his job working for Jack Crawford, but one of the parts of it he likes the most. He doesn't have to think, just speak knowledge into the air and let it take root.

It is a quiet and peaceful moment in time, and like all good things it cannot last. The lecture is over, the lights come up, the ranks of trainees with varying amounts of Elder blood flowing through their pulsing vessels begin to file out, discussing in a low buzz like insects or radio static. He can feel the weight of eyes on him as he packs up. A mortal in the FBI is an oddity. Although many here could be said to be related through their lineage, nepotism is not the right word for what goes on. Merely that they are of the ruling class, and what else is to be expected?

At least true Royalty, the purer lines, have little interest in the vocations of mortal culture. He won't find any of them here, and the weak-blooded are not so much of a threat to him. He lies within the aegis of Jack's protection, which is some small comfort. Will is too valuable to be consumed, even if he is not always of much use when their crime scenes are the result of Godlings warring against each other. Some are close enough to human to read. Others pass the line into incomprehensible.

Speaking of that particular individual, here he is now. Jack Crawford steps from malleable, ever moving shadows into warm electrical light that throws strange highlights from his skin and makes odd colours bloom like an oil-slick. He looks serious, and so Will knows that another crime is waiting for them outside these walls.

"This case is slightly outside of our usual remit," Jack explains, as they walk the echoing corridors of the Quantico facility. It is an odd building, warped in unnatural ways, full of passages that lead nowhere, or loop back on themselves defying the simple perception of space that mortals are bound to. Every corner is a breeding pool for strange shadows and lesions on walls that weep blood, birthing whispers on the edge of hearing. It does not bother Agent Crawford, and Will has learned to get used to it.

"How so?" he asks, accepting the thick folder Jack hands him.

"This is all human on human crime," Jack explains, "seven girls taken over as many months from college campuses around Minnesota, and now an eighth missing just this weekend. It just so

happens that one of them was a member of a Royal household, and the Lady would rather like to find out who stole her.”

“Member of a household,” Will scoffs. “You mean a pet.”

“If you want to put it in those terms, yes,” Crawford replies. He looks at Will a little strangely. Sometimes Will forgets how unusual his upbringing was, roaming around the country from state to state, slipping through the cracks, having little truck with society of any kind. He should be used to the way of the world by now, and yet somehow these things still send a frisson of unease down the back of his spine.

Still, things are better than they once were. After the Restorationist riots at the turn of the previous century, some small concessions were made – though many of those revolutionaries were broken in mind and body as punishment for the depths of their temerity. The Old Ones have been amongst them now for so long that their blood penetrates an ever greater proportion of the populace, offering these weak hybrids their own form of protection. Now it is only the pure who still rule, who still rightfully ought be called Royalty, and who operate by their own rules and own laws without recourse to the mores and preferences of their subjects.

Will can understand this. They have power, and this means they do as they want. It does not mean – as is true for so many – that he has come to accept it, that he does not yet feel the sting of it every day. But he knows he will never speak up. He doesn’t have the courage to be a Restorationist. Knows that to evoke the attention of a Godling is to sacrifice his own life, his own mind, his own autonomy. He must be interested in his own survival first.

“So we have patronage for this case,” he says, flicking through the photographs and documents and drips and drabs of evidence he has been presented. “I’m sure that’ll be a great comfort to these girls’ families.”

“The comfort will be in catching their killer,” Jack replies, with a warning tone. Will is pushing it, and he knows it.

“What do we have so far?”

“Not much.” Jack says. “No bodies, no evidence, nothing. He takes them on the Friday so no-one reports them missing until Monday. Whatever he’s doing, he needs the weekend.”

“For the sake of argument, I’d ask why you’re so sure these are murders rather than abductions.”

“We both know what’s more likely.”

Will nods. “And there’s no sign that more than one person is involved. That this isn’t some kind of flesh-trafficking ring.” A recognised problem, more so with the resurgence of so many millennial cults, eager mortals caught up in religious fervour for the Gods that rule their world and lives, willing to pay ridiculous sums for suitable sacrifices.

“We’ve considered the possibility, of course,” Jack tells him. “The girls all look alike, and at first we thought they were all virgins. Further investigation illustrated otherwise. A cult would have made sure.”

“A serial killer then.” Will sighs. At least this one has a pattern, some reason running in the back of his head, even if it wouldn’t make sense to most of humanity. “He wouldn’t need to keep taking

more if he still had them somewhere. And we're sure he is human?"

"If he wasn't, he'd have no need to hide," Jack replies.

"Unless he's more human than not," Will argues. Ignores the flicker of anger, of sorrow, of the bone-deep sense of *unfairness* that lurks leviathan in his belly, in the centre of him. True Royalty can still hunt as they wish. Their lesser cousins must petition for the privilege, and may not get it at all. "He might not have the right. Be aiming above his station."

"Perhaps," Jack allows. "But let's hope for all our sakes that that isn't the case. We want you to be able to get as deep into his mind as possible, solve this as *quickly* as possible."

Jack leads him into his office, to the pin-board with the collages and photographs laid out geographically. Will has to step around the antique desk to get to it – oak upholstered in tanned human skin, a relic from a previous Bureau Director rather closer to Royalty than the owner it has now passed to. He examines the most recent victim.

Elise Nichols. Supposed to have returned home to her parents to house-sit and apparently never made it. She looks so very normal, so very natural and human. It always makes Will angry, when people prey on other people. They have enough enemies in their rulers without turning on each other.

"We focus on her," he says, returning the photograph to its rightful place.

"They all have the same eye colour, the same hair colour," Jack says, "roughly the same age, the same height, same weight. So, what is it about all of these girls?"

"It's not about all of these girls," Will replies, looking from one to another to the next, trying to see what it is their killer sees, divining his psychology from even such small clues as these. "It's about one of them. The one that's special to him. The one that *means* something. The others are as much camouflage as they are repetition of this... sacred act."

"Then is he working up to this sacred act, as you call it, or re-living it?"

"The goal, the one that's most precious to him... she wouldn't be the first or the last. She'll be hidden in amongst them. He'd hide how special she was. I would. Wouldn't you?"

He almost wishes that this would be it, that the relatively simple, uninvolved analysis would be all that Jack needs from him. That he could return to his classroom, remain detached and aloof from all the messy, fractured emotions that are sure to come from a case like this. When it's humans killing Godlings he doesn't need to try and disassociate from the emotions afterwards; he luxuriates in them, lets himself pretend he was one of those with the will to do what they do, to slay the monsters in the dark. When it's something like this, as he knows from his days in Homicide, the borrowed feelings are poisonous, sickening. He doesn't want to be the sort of person that they are, that his empathy forces him to become if only for a short while.

"I want you to get closer to this," Jack is telling him. "Otherwise the fallout is going to hit all of us and it's not going to be pretty."

Will has never been in a position to refuse him.

There's a grieving family, a welter of messy emotion, and then, surprisingly, an actual crime scene. The reasons are not yet clear why their killer returned Elise's body, but it gives Will something to work with and that's more than he was expecting from this trip. He can stand in that room and slip into the mind of a man who does what he does not from a place of hate but rather from all-consuming love. A hungry, possessive love, stripped of all boundaries of propriety, existing merely as need. He puts his hands around her throat and the life passes from her into him and he owns her. She can never leave him.

He surfaces with the awareness of eyes upon him. Will is constantly attuned to the weight of a hundred different types of gaze, from coldly assessing, to a simple student crush, to distaste and dislike. This gaze is friendly and familiar. He turns his head to see Beverly Katz waiting at the threshold.

She is one of the few Godlings he likes. Beverly has a blunt honesty that fosters an easy friendship and allows little pretence. Her Blood is stronger than many in the Bureau, and yet she is somehow down-to-earth despite it. She seems to rather like humans, not regarding them particularly as prey or pet or pest but simply as another species, and even a vaguely interesting one at that. In this, she is similar to the only other being of Royal lineage – and near to pure Royalty at that – he has met that shares this outlook; Alana Bloom. Both of them have chosen names that are human, without the subtle layers of inherent meaning that plaster so many of the appellations their kind choose. Although when it comes to Alana, it is probably better not to draw any real conclusion from that. Royalty has many reasons for what it does, and only some of those reasons make any actual Gods'-damn sense.

"I'm starting to think you do that on purpose," he says.

"Gotta keep you on your toes," she replies, brushing something that isn't quite hair away from her many sets of eyes. "I found antler velvet in two of the wounds. Thought you might be able to use the extra evidence in drawing up your picture." Another way in which she is unlike most of her kind; she sees his abilities through the lens of the factual, as opposed to most of these creatures whose connection with what is real can be tenuous at the best of times. Will is used to them assuming that his empathy is merely a shadow of some of their own abilities, a human kind of magic. Perhaps some of it is, but the evidence must be there first. He needs a basis, a strong foundation to build upon.

"Yeah, thanks," he says, then is interrupted by a Godling he likes rather less than Beverly.

"Deer and elk pin their prey, okay, put all their weight onto the antlers to try and suffocate a victim. That's how they would kill like, a fox or a coyote." It's Zzzzeller, whose single pair of eyes are the shattered-mirror orbs of an insect, who clicks when he walks, and who, frankly, is just as irritating as a buzzing fly.

"Ruminants are herbivores. They don't have *prey*." The 'idiot' at the end of the sentence is implied. This from Jimmy Price, another of those rare humans working for the Bureau. Despite that he and Zzzzeller bicker it's in the way of family or close friends. Will is consistently surprised that they get on as well as they do, considering Zzzzeller's normal distain for most mortals. There's some story behind it, but he isn't exactly one to pry into the pasts of others, not when he's given any other choice.

"The velvet isn't part of the murder," Will says, before any argument can really get started. "At least, not the initial part of it anyway. It has healing properties. He likely put it there on purpose

when he returned the body. He wanted to undo as much as he could, given that he'd already killed her. Whatever he did to the others he couldn't do to her.

"This is an apology."

Will finds another dog running loose in the road on his drive back to Wolf Trap that night. He's a skinny mutt, staying well out of reach until Will finally entices him in with food. Dogs remain popular with mortals; less so with those of the Blood. Animals generally tend to react badly to Royalty, become frenzied, sometimes attacking with no heed for their own safety. Some instinct in them recognises things not of their own reality and knows they should not, by all rights, exist.

Will can sympathise.

Keeping such a large pack of abandoned strays is sort of his own little rebellion, his way of saying 'fuck you' to the majority of the unnatural things that rule his world. Oh, he'll admit that some of them are nice enough like Beverly or Alana, or even Jack when Will is being generous, but the fact remains that the true-bloods, the real Royal line, are above the law and make good use of that fact. Will has seen too many horrors ignored and swept under the carpet in his time to have much sympathy remaining for any of the Elder kind, even their thin-blooded get.

He names the newest mongrel Winston.

That night he has bad dreams. This is not unusual, not for him and not for any of human stock. He's not sure he or any other of the mortals he has ever talked to have experienced what might be called 'good' dreams. It's a popular Restorationist propaganda that once upon a time humanity had the ability to sleep quietly through the dark night, that it was only with the coming of the Great Old Ones that things became this constant struggle, this cycle of waking and falling back asleep and sweating and half-screaming.

The reply, of course, and commonly accepted fact, is that the reverse is true. Without the protective aegis of the Elder-kind against the void there was no such thing as sleep, only a period of hallucinatory terror that punctuated the space between the sun's setting and rising. Will supposes that theory and conjecture are not actually particularly helpful. His nights are what they are. At least sometimes they give him some vague and sibylline clues as to his latest case.

Something of that ilk happens that night, but he does not realise its true significance until later. The precise placing of Elise Nichols on her back, rising up, is a glimpse of a future kill displayed in a Minnesota field just for him. A flash of that which is to come, un-interpretable in the present moment, as these things so often are.

The next day, back at the Quantico building, Jack gives him another of his patented pep-talks. Will tends to think of them more as threats. He's confident that Crawford isn't even aware that he's doing it, but it is plain enough in his body language, in the timbre of his voice. Godlings are predators, and their instincts are to act as such. This mysterious Royal Lady must be putting on the pressure, for Jack to be so adamant, so nearly desperate.

Will explains what he has managed to pick up, the love, the sorrow, the adoration, the complicated mixture of emotions that differentiates this killer from most other human serial murderers. As a

profile it both tells them much and not enough. The red, red walls of the bathroom throb around them like the beating of a great heart. Water, or some other liquid, trickles on the edge of his hearing, not quite heard. That slight irritation of something you can't quite be sure is there. Will grits his teeth, on edge.

Used to be he would separate himself from the emotions of the criminals he profiled, back in his days at Homicide, by reminding himself just how different his real feelings were. But there's so much that under very different circumstances would be normal and positive that it's proving hard to do that now.

"We'll find him, I promise you that," he says to Jack mostly to provide an excuse to leave the room. It closes in around him, has the hint of properties that make his eyes water, his head throb, his vision warp in and out like someone about to faint, half-drunk on heat or tiredness or incipient ill health.

The corridors outside are not much better, but in movement he can persuade himself that his shifting perspectives are mere illusions, rather than the insult to the real that they are. That the darkness clustering at the edges of his vision is not growing, hungry shadow, or his brain buckling under the unnatural pressure of this confluence of bloodlines like a deep-sea diver with a fault just starting to show in his suit.

Escaping, at least for a little while, he still has a job to do. Will makes his way to the lab, atmospheric with bubbling beakers and archaic, arcane instruments in a way that is half considered effect and half genuine function. Zzzzeller and Price have already begun the autopsy, and Beverly has news of her own to report.

"I found a shaving of metal on her dress," she tells him, the double-pair of bat-wings on her back flickering in and out of reality with her excitement. "Which, considering we found no usable prints and no skin or other parts of the killer we could track, means it's our only lead."

"Then we should be looking at plumbers, steam-fitters, tool-workers," Will suggests, crossing his arms over his body, fragile meat protection. He's not even on the same scale of psychic sensitivity as most of the Blood, but for a human he can pick up a lot, and the lab is too heavy with the spoor of death and violence to make him comfortable. The hairs on the back of his neck prickle. Air ghosts in mysterious currents without discernible source.

The shadows seem more present today than is normal. The inky folds of the body-bag between plastic and flesh have a hypnotic power. They whisper inside his head, and Will finds himself fixing upon them, staring into nothing, this small cousin of the great void, the space between stars. He stares and all else recedes into the darkness. He is being enveloped by a vast and creeping cold.

Within it something pale rises up. A corpse whitened by death and drained of all blood, hanging, draped in her dress and the falling curtain of her hair from lolling head. There is something behind her. Something wild and desperate.

The antlers pierce her as smooth as sliding through air itself. Like hooks they hold her and she is swiftly soaked in crimson thick and dripping. She tilts her face upwards, slowly, slowly. She is no longer herself, but something both more and less. Something of the void.

Abruptly Will Graham blinks and finds that he has been let free. That whatever mindless malevolence or semi-benevolent God lurks in the dark places of the FBI has given him a vision of a

true thing. Clearer than the circuitous prophecy of his dreams. His mouth opens and words come out, although he is not entirely certain that this is of his own accord.

“She was mounted on them,” he says. “Like hooks. She may have been bled.”

“Her liver has been removed,” Zzzzeller notes, ungloved, chitinous hands plunging sticky into the autopsy gash from clavicles to pubis. He claims he can pick up clues that way; Will privately thinks he just likes it. “He took it out, then put it back in again.”

“Why would he cut it out if he was just going to sew it back in again?” Price asks.

The epiphany rises up from the back of Will’s mind like a behemoth dripping from the sea. He suspects he has known it for a while, at least since the confrontation with Jack in the bathroom, but has not been quite able to put it into words until now.

“There was something wrong with the meat,” he tells them, with the bitter taste of raw blood at the back of his mouth, and a great and gaping hunger mirrored in his heart. He thinks he might have some dim glimpse of how Royalty might feel. Becoming their prey is not such an unlikely fate out of numberless, horrible ways to die, but that is not cannibalism. The Elder kin cannot be counted as human.

Cannibalism, real cannibalism, is something else entirely, and all the more horrifying for it.

“She has liver cancer,” Zzzzeller replies, the abilities of his lineage useful for once.

“He’s eating them.”

This world is strange and flat. Even after so many years it fits ill, gravity-heavy, constant sparks from buzzing electrons scraping over hide hidden in the spaces between photons, staid and solid and only partially malleable. It has been changed as appropriate, as much as it can be. Not quite enough. Still. Entertainment enough to be found here that he has not chosen to leave.

The lesser kin, warped stock wherein codified script of mortality presses odd against ghosts and echoes of brother-sister-selves, are fit enough to survive in this half and half world – they *are* it, more or less. Never suffer the psychoses of slave and servant-beasts. And his sibling-conquerors – though adapted best for the environments they once called home, confluences of non-Euclidean geometry outside of what their subjects understand as space and time – withstand the touch of this dimension well enough. They have the minds of predators, the bodies of sleek, wet, changeable things from deep waters. They have mixed their blood with human blood.

Spirit of curiosity, experiment, amusement, instruments of will, colonisation... Many reasons why. Not a choice he has yet made.

Warping the world does have curious effects on pure mortal minds, and that does interest him. Has made it his habit to observe them, in the reduced avatar or fragment of the utter self he uses. Allows them use of his false-name; Hannibal – ‘Grace of the Master God’. Consumption is in his nature, be it souls or flesh or pain, but for his patients he makes the attempt to rein this in. Basking in their pure and untainted anguish is rewarding enough in itself, without supping, and tainting the purity of the cup.

Franklin is one of those broken human delicacies. Whatever he might have been in another place and time, here the constant pressure of living in a world which as it must seem to him is cracked open in a hundred weeping rents, that looks up every night on a foreign, alien sky, has made him entirely neurotic. Human finds himself unable to socialise, overcome by both desperate attraction to and fear of Hannibal's own kind. So many moments experienced through shuddering breaths of fear. Surrounds him like a piquant perfume.

Therefore fascinating to watch the flickering pattern of the neurons in his human brain, change them through usage of simple words. No need to resort to application of power. Yet he does try to harden this one and all his patients against the world they find themselves in, for it is of intellectual interest. A puzzle. Is it indeed possible to cure any of these people?

Perhaps merely keeping them stable is the best that can reasonably be hoped for. If so, he may politely state that in this he excels.

From the present moment, past streams back and the web of possible futures opens up. Something else to get used to, this singular progression. An hour passes and that which happens coalesces with each second as the universe reforms into a different shape. By the end of it, Franklin has made the air heady with sweat and anxious pheromones, and Hannibal scents from it deeply as he escorts him out. A hunger rises within him, but is content with the existence of the pleasurable ambience the man's stress leaves behind. Franklin is at base harmless, and does not deserve to be devoured, no matter what artistry of taste lurks inside his weakened, fragile mind. That is a fate reserved for those unworthy of merest existence, wounding and worsening the world with their presence.

Another with Royal blood waits behind the door, sensed before it is reached. Hannibal's thin-blood seeming shell with stable muscle, bone, flesh is yet utterly under his control – difficult sometimes to remember it needs something so simple as the molecule oxygen – so does not react when seeing the man with recourse to light and optics and electrical signals traversing nerves. Amusement spikes internally when the man mistakes his identity. Evidence of skill in creating his disguise. And proof, even could he not see it with the self sitting quiet in spaces between atoms, that this is a real thin-blood. He tongues curiously at a mind alien with attenuated mortality, undetected by its simplicity.

“Oh, Doctor,” the little Godling says, apologetic once its fault has been exposed. “Sorry. I’m uh, Special Agent Jack Crawford, FBI. May I come in?” He produces relevant identification, down to burned, raw sigils extremely unwise to attempt to fake, so Hannibal has no obvious reason available to refuse him. It strikes him that he has a certain familiarity with this name.

Ah. The woman who came close enough to almost unmask him. A pity, about that one. Might have made good follower, good worshiper.

Hannibal has his own, rather specific, reasons for remaining hidden. Secreting away the truth about his essence, the richness of his Blood, hunting in darkness when any mortal and many thin-bloods might be his prey by right. If the circumstances of his flight from Europe had been different... But is of a past made solid by the workings of this place, thus beyond even his skills to alter.

“You may wait in the waiting room,” he tells Agent Crawford, so he might conceal what ought be concealed. Would not do to leave obvious clue lying where it will be seen, make man realise his ‘crimes’. A possible future obvious enough to be easily averted. Inconvenient, to kill him. Sloppy. Unworthy of him.

Still, his instincts are for chaos, in possibly futile attempts to create unseen and unpredictable outcomes. Unable to deny them any more than he could deny his self. Well, could, but would no longer be self, but some other new self that he might not like as much. Very dull. He leaves the Wound Man drawing near the top of the pile of his art, a mere sliver visible. Mayhap this Jack Crawford will see it, pull it forth, have awareness dawn on him like the rising of a diseased star. Perhaps it will go un-noticed. These are two known futures. Only the resolution of the universe will concrete which one.

Deliciousness of the scenario is too wonderful to resist.

“Please, come in,” he says when he is done, inviting Crawford into his office. He cannot deny his curiosity as to the man’s purpose here. “So, may I ask how this is all about me?”

He is careful never to be clumsy with words, although pure concepts come more naturally to the workings of his mind.

“You can ask, but I may have to ask you a few questions first.” Although thin-blood looks and sounds confident and assured, Hannibal has licked deep enough into his head to perceive he has been distracted by his sumptuous surroundings. It is true, Hannibal is a collector, and since coming to the New World has amassed sufficient resources to indulge his tastes. Objects of worship from scores of pre-conquest cultures are displayed around the room, arranged in certain fashions to prompt confluence of primordial energies, give shadows life and colour and motion, make this place a comfort and succour to those who in any part are not of this world.

A pity that many of his patients find it uncomfortable at first, but their simple psyches can be reconfigured to accept it with only little prompting. It is not a remedy that can be sustained for longer than the span that they stay within the places he has claimed; else he could go into business as a miracle-worker and heal the psychoses of a nation of humans.

“You expecting another patient?”

“No. We are all alone.” The better if events require blood to be spilt.

“No secretary?”

“I find that those of our kind intimidate my patients. And I have not yet found a human who both suits my exacting requirements and has sufficient mental strength.”

“I suppose that’s a common problem in your line of work,” Crawford says. Hannibal inclines his head slightly in agreement.

It is then that the Agent notices the table in the corner. Flicking back the protective sheet of new-born-lambskin – an unfortunate effect of the many artefacts that anything which has the appearance of life left in this room has a tendency to make that seeming into reality – reveals his more recent work. And one old one, half-hidden.

But, as seemed more probable, thin-blood is characteristic of his kind and Jack Crawford sees but does not *see*. Even humans sometimes more observant, if only because if they are not watchful they know that some seemingly inconsequential thing may still result in their deaths.

To put the matter to a final rest, one way or the other, Hannibal says, “I’m beginning to suspect you’re investigating me, Agent Crawford.”

“No, no,” the man says, laughing. “No, you were referred to me by Alana Bloom. In the Psychology Department, Georgetown.”

Ah, this piques his interest. Alana (Atgyatmalkath is closer to accurate, but still constrained) is ally-kin, friend so much as that human concept can be applied. Interests and spheres of influence aligned. Both curious about workings of servant-race, she more affectionate to them than he thinks seemly. But nearly/not-quite pure-blood, half-ascended, so can be allowed her foibles. Rumours though, he had heard, and silenced rude mouths later in quiet places. Rumours that she has allowed intimacy with humans, mind to mind, true self to self. Unlikely. Human would not survive process, and that would displease her.

Still slander, which is more appropriate to mortal perversions of underground pornography rings than to those of the Blood, who ought know better.

The joining done to start the Bloodlines had nothing of intimacy about it. Mortals might label this sexual, but they are unable to understand the nature of Royalty, and thus do not comprehend. Not breeding so much as reshaping. No touch of inner truths. No trust that vulnerable moment will not turn to advantage taken and minds, teeth, claws tearing the lesser apart. No. Royalty does not share with lessers. Royalty *takes*.

“Most psychology departments are filled with personality deficient,” he says. “Dr Bloom would be the exception.”

Small talk thereafter for some time, preamble to actual request Crawford has come here regarding. Form matters little; it is a concept long polite in human society, unfortunately adopted by the lesser of his kin. Needless, but he suffers through it for propriety’s sake until the heart of matter is reached.

“I need you help me with a psychological profile.”

“May I ask whose?” Hannibal says.

“Will Graham.”

The pause of a moment long held, as the world tilts upon its axis. Syllables hang heavy in air and spin out new possibilities and are glorious. Force is made manifest in dimensions outside of limited four. A talisman and prophecy, a name of Power, and the inevitable now set into inexorable motion. The universe solidifies around its new reality and is changed forever.

“It would be my pleasure,” he replies.

In a manner now replete with familiarity from repetition over multitudes of occasions, circumstances, meetings, Hannibal dons a camouflage appropriate to this introduction. Knows it must be fit to fool this new and curious mortal, who sits so heavy on the fabric of reality and future events. Practise in so doing has not been only in human clothes; his own existence is camouflage of a kind, for true self cannot fully manifest on this plane no matter the expense of energy. Must project this body-shell, or other body-shells describing facets of What Is into shallow world of short-lived beasts. Still, while he *does* wear this avatar, he means to follow the mores of the society that surrounds him. Was stylish creature back in Sea That Is Not, so must be stylish here too, when limited to mere four limbs, to pale, smooth, easily pierced skin.

Now he armours himself in drab; browns and soft khaki and cream. He is blending in.

Most of the Blood who are not truly Royal cannot make seemings with such accuracy. Control over form is less, dictated by circumstance of birth and melding of genetic code read poorly. Not so for himself. This flesh carefully shaped, showing off his skill at sculpture to any who might divine his secret. How close does one look? To see what he is? Or think, like foolish Jack Crawford, that only an unfortunate thin-blood. Most satisfying. Hiding in plain sight. Will it serve to trick Will Graham too? Perhaps not. Must be some reason the signifiers of momentous fate surround this mortal's name.

Thus arrival in Crawford's office experiencing mostly curiosity, anticipation, something not quite akin to unease, and so he settles down to wait. Thin-blood provides him with a cup of abysmal coffee barely seasoned with slight dash of blood from whatever animal died on their sacrificial altar this morning, and Hannibal has no intention of consuming such lesser tribute. Drinking it is pretence, raising to lips and spiriting away fluid into void where tiny, mindless entities will lick it up gladly.

Then finally moment comes, accompanied by frisson of air, all shadows in the building thrilling at human's passage. Self shudders with it, pangs in sympathy, knowledge of something special. He fixes attention in all means and modes of sensing on the door and the mortal who passes through it, sparing Hannibal a quick glance quickly dropped, hanging coat from chair's back. Will Graham (future warps as name even crosses across the gulf of his mind) sits sprawling and open despite the acrid bite of nervousness that seasons the air.

"You didn't tell me we were expecting company Jack," he says, his fingers twitching against his knee.

Visual inspection only – any using basic senses given to human bodies – would not immediately show that Will Graham is something special. Appearance is scruffy and unkempt, not unusual for a mortal, and particularly not for one in position this man occupies. Clothes basic, masculine, outdoorsman, lower-class, colour hunter green. Earthy; forest hue showing attachment to the nature of his home, with little liking for the sharper tones more in fashion amongst Eldritch-kind. A swiftness to his thoughts that Hannibal finds immediately appealing; sharp bursts of electricity flickering between neurons. Although he will not lock a gaze his eyes still track, taking in details with little effort.

"This is Hannibal," Agent Crawford says, making introductions. "He's a psychiatrist. I've asked for his help in drawing up a profile at the request of the Lady. She's... concerned about the speed at which we're progressing."

"Don't send a human to do a Royal's job?" Will asks, with a certain wry sarcasm.

"She wanted a profile of you." Crawford is apologetic. Hannibal watches as every muscle tenses in Will's body. Human head turns towards him; scent of fear floods the air for the first time.

"He's here to get into my head?" Fight or flight starting to kick in, and wisely when faced with a superior predator, Will Graham is tending towards flight. "No, no Jack, you promised! No-one poking around up there, no-one messing around with who I am, you *promised!*"

"Mr Graham." The words must come swiftly else have crucial first meeting soured forever. Though might be amusing to watch the man flee, hunt him down through unfamiliar maze of this geographically implausible building... Still, unwise. This is too important to leave to chance. Initial

impression will echo into future, close some paths, open others. Impossible yet to predict final outcome, must merely manoeuvre in optimal fashion. "I am not that kind of psychiatrist."

"No?" He is half on his feet, an arrow cocked on the trembling bow-string of his body. "You're of the Blood aren't you? That's what your kind *do*."

"It is my personal belief that such mechanisms are crude at best, and butchery at their worst," Hannibal replies, speaking both truth and lie. Contingent on vagaries of self, of circumstance. What is true now is not always true, and vice versa. He draws the fingers of his thin-blood shell along back of what would be Crawford's chair were they all seated, turning his gaze away to seem less threatening. Input of lesser senses is merely ghost in the back of larger self's mind. "They are not to my taste. In that regard you have nothing to fear from me. If you feel yourself disinclined to trust my word, consider that I am a friend of Alana Bloom, whom I believe you know."

A slow nod. Tension eases slightly.

"My methods are much like hers, or that of any human psychiatrist. Simply talking."

"I would have thought you'd find that too mortal, too *constricting*," Will says, some of his bite coming back.

"I like a challenge," Hannibal replies mildly. "But I believe there is a case that requires discussion between you and Agent Crawford. Please, allow me to stand back and observe for the moment. An interview can come later, if I believe it's necessary. I assure you this is mostly a formality."

Will breathes out; long shudder, exhalation driving tension purposefully from his body. It lingers on the air before it dissipates, signifying purged emotion's strength. He sinks back into his chair. Composes himself, and turns his mind to thoughts of their killer.

Hannibal considers the facts Jack Crawford has briefed him on whilst the pair talks. Considers factors setting human apart from most of kin-creatures, little dull scrabbling insects swarming over planet's surface, fit to enact will of betters and that is all. Unique mind, thin-blood Agent says, working in unique way. Able to assume the point of view, very self, of any of his own kind. Mutability not often seen in this world, in these beasts, in any mind of mortal flesh. Sketched normally onto the real as brief and static images soon wiped clean, not so this Will Graham.

Less clear if the man can apply the same trick to less familiar selves. Will himself has avowed not. Finds the eldritch, disparate, multitude of minds that makes up the Blood too different to fully comprehend. Hannibal has his own suspicions. Does not, would not, fit entirely with weight and significance gained in all of space and time most easily seen stretching forth from this point. No, he would not be so limited. Rather that Will Graham is afraid to wander too deep into weird and strange. To put his mind and sanity in danger, to risk losing his own mundane point of view.

Lacks ambition. Strange. Opportunity presented by own self-ness to be great and do great things, so why deny? Why be afraid? Why pretend anything other than what you are – and somehow not change self into tiny ordinary mortal by doing so? Destiny too great to pretend otherwise, too great to avoid.

No, cannot be allowed to hide forever. Cannot be allowed to cower and make mockery of what might be, to choose lesser path and let universe crystallise it. Therefore Hannibal's course of action is clear. It falls to him to expand Will Graham's mind, spur to full potential, shape into something glorious, terrible and majestic. And after that?

Well. Has missed his cults and followers, abandoned with the Old Country he once ruled. What better for a God than to win a new Prophet?

Will is not entirely sure what he feels about this Godling psychiatrist Jack has recruited. He hadn't been what he might have expected, if he had actually been given the chance to expect anything at all. He'd been... polite. Not friendly, more naturally aloof, but it wasn't exactly in an arrogant way. The fact that he knew Alana – and Will had called to verify that and been treated to a recitation of the being's personal and academic virtues that left him feeling slightly off-balance and unsure if he was jealous – was a positive mark in his favour, in terms of his likely attitude towards humans.

That doesn't mean he trusts Hannibal though. Not yet. It's hard enough trusting human strangers with his ability to read them, worse when faced with an unknown and potentially malevolent creature whose thoughts and motives are impenetrable. Although the psychiatrist seems to be a thin-blood, judging by his appearance and by his lack of much in the way of inhuman characteristics. There are his eyes; dark, maroon pools without pupil, iris or sclera, and swept over occasionally by milky nictitating membranes, and there had been something a little off about his mouth, or rather what lurked behind his lips, but otherwise nothing. Considering one of Will's fellow lecturers is composed of a horde of buzzing flies that assumes the shape of a man, Hannibal seems rather ordinary.

For the moment at least, Will doesn't expect he'll be seeing him again anytime soon. Hannibal had promised to give a favourable provisional report back to the concerned Lady, and both he and Jack Crawford had given their words to at least try and persuade Her to be content with just that. He would find the fact that he passed whatever bullshit test of character a Royal finds most appropriate reassuring, if it weren't for the fact that human sanity is fairly low down on the list of their kind's priorities. In fact passing it probably means he is just as unstable as he has always feared.

These are not thoughts he is comfortable dwelling on, so he puts them out of his mind. There is an entirely human killer out there that he is meant to be catching, and that takes priority.

Neither he nor the rest of the FBI team have much time for further investigation down the lines his current deductions have taken them. Not before Jack is storming into the lab with a report of another murder, one that breaks the monthly pattern. Although it might not seem like it, this is a good thing. If he's speeding up he's also getting sloppy. He'll be making mistakes, and those mistakes will get him caught.

The fact that it has cost another young girl her life turns his stomach, it does, but in so many years in this environment, he has become used to that sensation. Few of the Royal lineage give a care for the loss of human life, and he knows there will be no sorrow or sympathy coming from those corners. If anyone is going to care more than a passing fancy of 'oh, too bad' about the killer's victims, it will have to be Will Graham, and that's not an easy burden to bear.

Getting to Minnesota is something of a production. Previously enough time had elapsed that flying was quick enough to serve their purposes. Since their killer has increased his speed, now so too must they. The basement of the Quantico building is tunnelled into rock, a rough-walled cave network with strange acoustics and as wet with damp as though built by the sea. They descend into it, bringing light with them in the form of flickering pitch torches, making the dark dance.

Will and Jimmy are not best adapted for either this environment or the method of their travel. Will still has scars on him where the serpent's maw of the portal took its toll from his flesh. But a true-

blood is pushing them, and they are driven to desperate things.

A thin spiral of steps leads down to the final cave and forces them single file. Will can hear a low moan rising up from the deeps below. The wet, shuffling of some vast creature. Wind stirs softly against his face, all too easy to imagine as breath. He follows the dark smears of Beverly's wings in the air and fights the desire to close his eyes entirely.

The sacrifice they have brought with them (no, he will not acknowledge its existence until he has to, it's safer that way) is pushed to the front when the cave opens itself up before them. It trembles and makes feeble, animal, sounds, its eyes rolling fitfully. The Royals breed them somewhere, Will knows. Raise them alone, never seeing light, never interacting with another of their species. They are feral. The Lady – a mockery of a patron – provided this one.

Will does not look away when Jack makes the cut on the man's arm to spill blood and call the beast. Shoves his empathy way down to avoid any sudden, illogical temptations to see the shattered mind. Calling this creature human anymore would not even be accurate, so far has he been broken. His death might even be a mercy. That does not mean Will feels nothing at being forced to see it.

The beast comes, winding and hungry, from the darkness. Not truly a snake, it is covered in bluntly waving vestigial limbs, stumpy and malformed. Its head is nothing but mouth, vast, gaping, baring rows upon rows of teeth like the blade of a saw. It has the tiny, white, blind eyes of something that was born never to see the sun.

The sacrifice disappears into it swallowed whole. The throat far behind the fangs convulses and starts to open, black and faintly liquid. Muscles spasm and pulse. Secretions dark as oil and sizzling like acid splatter the uneven stone at their feet.

Now Will closes his eyes. *Now* he cannot bear to see. There is a fitful moment where stinking breath hits his face like a punch and pressure closes in all around him, a moment when all sense of up and down become meaningless, when proprioception fails and he has no idea where any part of his body is. Then it is over. He is out, and the richer feast than usual seems to have sated the beast enough that he is in one piece as well.

He opens his eyes to the wan, sickly light of a corn-field in Hibbing, Minnesota. They have arrived.

The latest kill is a woman impaled upon the antlers of a severed stag's head, the animal's tongue lolling out purpled and dark, its blood staining the earth around it and trickling from its nostrils, caked and attracting flies. The victim is naked. On display. Arched backwards and trailing limbs into the hot, shimmering, late summer air.

There is a lurid symbolism present in this corpse that was not seen at any of the other murders. Even if their killer, this 'Shrike' as some rag of a human newspaper has named him, is deteriorating, this doesn't feel like him. The emotions behind it are too different, and yet past the surface there is nothing for Will to latch on to. This scene does not *fit*, and the dissonance is uncomfortable like a tight band round his chest, constricting his breathing.

Corvids circle in the air, always returning no matter how many times Zzzzeller and Prince try to chase them off. There is something not quite natural about the birds. Too big? Their feathers too black, their crowing mouths opening a shade more than ought to be possible? Some instinct in Will is murmuring into his ear that there is an eldritch influence here. It might not be the killer, because

there is still the ghost of a something here for him to catch, as slippery as it is. But Royal magics, Royal trickery and bending of what Is into what Might Have Been, or what Might Never Have Been...

He is uneasy. There is a sacrificial aspect to the way the woman is laid out, but no God-markings, no little idol either hand-carved or bought mass-market at the temple shrines. It's as fake as the rest of this. A mask. A seeming. Something pulled over the face of something else to conceal specific purpose with specific purpose. This isn't the Shrike, but it's someone who knows his work well. Not a copycat, not exactly, because this isn't a copy, more like... a critique.

Yes, that thought fits. This is an artist conferring judgement upon a colleague, or rather someone simply in the same line of work because this makes plain the killer thinks himself far above the original.

"He took her lungs," Zzzzeller says, to add to Will's analysis. "Pretty sure she was alive when it happened." It's unseemly that he sounds almost pleased about that, Will thinks. Bites down on the futile admonitions that want to escape his lips, knowing they'll do nobody any good. Zzzzeller is a little Godling with no care for any human he doesn't personally know, and has the same likes and dislikes as any of his kin.

It's not comfortable, being prey. Having to watch every word and act in case they decide you're next. Sometimes Will wants to scream because the pressure is too much, it's like being buried alive, drowned in the deeps of an ocean too vast and desolate to bear. But he knows where that road leads, and the screaming would never stop, and he'd die anyway. So.

It's the little things like that, just like that. That one comment sending his mind spiralling into a tangent of bile and hate he'll never act on, how the fact that he even acknowledges that there is something wrong makes him an outlier amongst happy slaves, and then he has to remind himself how lucky he is, compared to some, or he really will do something he'd quickly regret.

Words come out of his mouth that are relevant to the case, despite the turmoil within. He speaks on automatic. He has become good at that, over the years.

"So this is a copycat?" Jack says, and Will nods, standing, not quite remembering having crouched for a better look in the first place.

"The human we're looking for has no interest in *field kabuki*," he spits.

"Human? You think this girl's killer isn't?"

Will shakes his head. "I don't know. I don't know, I can't quite... *see* him. Maybe just a touch of the Blood, maybe a lot more and I'm just seeing a glimpse, a, a *photograph* of the face he was wearing when he did this. But I can tell you more about *our* killer just because of how much this *isn't it*."

He goes on, lists the second house or cabin for the kill room slash antler room – the two one and the same – and the daughter whose innocent actions have become the trigger, the sacred act of consumption he can't quite bring himself to carry out on her so he externalises and eats and is never full. It's all good, he knows it's good, and in that moment remembers with a flush of sickening emotion the dream of Elise Nichols, laid out *just like that* and ascending into the darkness of the future and realms where he cannot follow.

He was seeing this, he understands that now. Not that he can think of any way the dream would have been helpful in preventing this, or in solving this case. He shudders and lets it go. Just another gift or curse from the Night and the Void, utterly useless and better forgotten.

“Can you tell me *anything* about the copycat?” Jack asks.

Will shakes his head, already preparing to leave and hopefully by a more standard route than the one they arrived by. “If he’s of eldritch stock there’s not much I can do, you know that. You need to ask one of the Blood for their opinion. Maybe Hannibal. He seems competent enough.”

Thankfully this seems to be enough to pacify him. At least, he turns back to the Science Trio processing the scene, and Will can wander off to where the field meets the road, sit down on hot tarmac and allow the pulsating, sickly sun to warm his face with its rays. Although the ghost of a headache lurks behind his eyes, it is enough to keep it at bay for now.

His sleep that night is characterised at first by a familiar dream of a lake of blood lapping around his ankles as he stands casting a line into the foul waters. Dead fish bob to the surface around him, washing up on the shore splitting bellies full of wriggling black worms and scuttling white insects like living marble. He whips the rod out, letting the fly sing through the air, falling with a gory splash. It is unpleasant, but it has come to him enough that it has lost most of its quiet horror.

He has hope for a relatively settled night, therefore, before the creature appears.

It ought not in itself be so terrifying. It is simply a stag, dark as a shadow, plumed with raven feathers, crowned by sharp and deadly antlers straight and tall like spears. It is watching him, and Will knows it is watching him, and it knows that he knows that it is watching him. It lowers its head towards him as if to charge, but does not move.

Will looks at it, and something within him recognises *something* about it, and trembles. He does not want it near him. It is ancient, and wise, and terrible, and it has a meaning that is clear to no conscious part of him. Danger, danger, says the speed of his heart racing inside his chest, and he only does not run because he does not want to provoke it into chasing him. Its leg raises and its hoof paws the ground with a great, hollow knocking.

Will wakes up, and realises there is, in fact, someone knocking on his door.

Stumbling out of bed in a mess of stale sweat, he elects to ignore the chaotic tangles of his hair and his state of undress – stained, ratty shirt and boxers. Whoever it might be either knows him well enough not to care, or is a Godling and therefore is unlikely to think this anything unusual for a human. Though disorientated, he is sure-footed in the unfamiliar, dark, room that smells of old blood and incense. When he yanks the door open, light momentarily blinds him.

Will blinks his vision clear and is surprised to see Hannibal waiting patiently at the threshold.

“Good morning Will,” the Godling says politely. “May I come in?”

Will drags a hand across his face, unbalanced. “Wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

“Jack was called away for business elsewhere. Acting on your previous advice, he has enlisted my services. I understand we have several construction sites to visit while we are in Minnesota. It shall

be our adventure.” He smiles, and it very nearly hits the mark. Something about his face, Will thinks idly. The angles are strange, sharp. Like someone assembling a human who has only seen one in pictures; a good job, but not quite there.

“May I come in?” Hannibal repeats.

There are some of Royal lineage who, like vampires in old stories cannot enter without an invitation. Will nods and steps aside, letting the being past him. Into the darkness.

When Hannibal’s own shadow passes over him he feels a sudden heat in his bones, quickly passing and leaving a chill in its wake. He tries not to shiver, is not sure he succeeds. His dream of the stag is still fresh in the back of his mind.

Hannibal, as it turns out, has brought food with him. The tote-bag he was carrying conceals a number of Tupperware containers nestled between changes of clothes. Will can’t deny a certain curiosity. What Godlings eat can be very varied, and not much of it is also fit for human consumption. From what little he can see though, this stuff looks... almost normal. That would bear out a theory of Hannibal having little of the Blood in his veins.

“I am very careful about what I put into my body,” he explains as he unpacks. “Which means I prepare most of my food myself. A protein scramble, to start the day. Some eggs, some sausage.”

“And safe for a human to eat?” Will asks, warily taking the tub.

“Of course.”

It does look good. Smells it too. Will always finds himself hungry in the mornings, after all that tossing and turning and sweating and getting up to pace out nervous energy and nausea before he can go back to sleep. He pokes his fork into the mixture, spears a sliver of sausage, a little heap of scrambled egg. Lifts it to his mouth, chews, swallows.

Knows immediately that he shouldn’t have done so.

There is something dark and alive in his belly. His hunger leaps, ravenous as a wild beast and utterly unfamiliar. His vision swims, now hawk-sharp, now blurred like looking through a veil of tears. Saliva pools on his tongue as he feels the compulsion take hold. His hand moves of its own accord, he cannot get enough, never enough, the food is life and he needs it, he needs it. He is half choking on it with his speed.

Hannibal watches him, and splits his face in a smile with sharp, sharp teeth.

“What’s in this?” Will sobs between bites, as his fork scrapes the sides of the bowl, then his hungry fingers quest after any little scrap of flesh or fat or juice that remains, licking residue from his hands. “What have you done to me?”

“Why, it’s human of course,” Hannibal replies, still smiling, one half of his face lit starkly in the light that streams in from the motel window, the other lost to the shadows. “You really should be wiser than to accept food from those you do not know, dear Will. The pact is struck now.”

Will’s head is swimming, the hunger still clawing at his throat. He looks down at his own hands, the skin over shaped muscle of his forearms. Feels his mouth water, wants in some far off way to

lift his arms up and sink in teeth and rip and tear and devour. He is weeping, soundlessly, tears rolling down to drip from his chin.

He loses consciousness.

Chapter 2

When Will wakes up again, he is spread-eagled on the motel bed, naked, unable to move his limbs. He feels like there is some great weight pinning him down, but he can't see anything. At least now he feels a little more like himself. The terrible hunger has passed, leaving only a ghost of itself, a horrific memory and a new sickness in his stomach. He has eaten... he has eaten human flesh. His body rebels at the thought, wants to purge itself, but though he retches nothing comes up.

"Now Will," Hannibal's voice says from the darkness, chiding. "How rude of you to try to reject the gift that I have given you."

Harsh laughter breaks out of Will's throat before he can clamp it shut. It sounds wild, not quite all there. He shudders, his skin rippling with horripilation, gasping and panting and just trying to *get away*. "Gift?" He shouts. "Gift? I didn't ask for this!"

It's stupidly futile. Of course he didn't ask, of course he didn't want it. Maybe there are people who do, who in terror bow down and let Royal Blood have their way with them, or who are driven into a state of adoration because what other option is there but to break, or who convince themselves that the sick rulers of this planet have any understanding of bargains or ability to stick to them. Will has always thought there were fewer of them than the Royals claim. But it doesn't matter what he does or does not want. He is utterly powerless, and Hannibal will do exactly what it is that *he* wants to do.

He could beg, but that would probably just make it worse.

He could cite laws, that mean this is entirely outside of what Hannibal ought to have the right to do if he is all that he appears, but if he has already gone this far then he won't care about that now.

"My dear Will," that soft voice says. "It is such a pity you will not remember this later, but it is too soon. This is not done to hurt you. You have no idea what the weight of you does to the Real. No idea of your Fate, your Destiny. No idea of your potential."

A shape moves, wells up out of the darkness. Will cannot stop the whimper that escapes from his lips. Wants to close his eyes, but it is far too late to look away now.

Hannibal is not, oh Great Old Gods, is not a thin-blood.

A huge heaving mass of strong, slender limbs and writhing tentacles covers the entirety of his peripheral vision, reaching to floor and walls and roof and leaving no space between. Long jaws hang half-open from a skull between serpentine and canine, flesh stretched taut over the bones, dozens of eyes glittering in the low light. There are so many teeth. Cold fire drips like drool, sticking to the cheap motel carpet and burning there, not spreading. A dozen tongues scent the air. The beast is crowned with a thicket of horns, embossed with precious metals, carved with runes, sparking against the air of this reality where it does not belong as it cocks its head to look at him.

Its hide is slick and black as the deep sea, more mammalian than piscine.

Will locks his mouth up tight against screams of terror, writhes as much as he can in a futile attempt at escape. His fingers claw at the sheets. His own skin is sopping with beading sweat, running down his bare sides, soaking beneath his spine.

The Royal that Hannibal clearly is comes closer. It is looming over the bed, the long prehensile tongues held mere inches away, licking at the air as though it has physical substance. Perhaps to them it does. Will finds himself utterly unable to close his eyes, as much as he wants to, and instead must fixate on the nearest and largest pair of Hannibal's many orbs. The corners of the gaping maw flicker upwards in a parody of a human smile.

"You are something special William," the abomination says, and it does not seem right that the voice is so exactly the same, yet it is. "Unique amongst your kind. When I have opened you up to the possibilities, oh, the things we shall do. The great. The terrible. My Prophet. My Prophet."

Massive nostrils flare, and Will realises the beast is sniffing at him. Enjoying, no doubt, the stink of his fear, his terror, his horror. Hannibal is not going to eat him, that much is clear, but it might be better for him if it did. The *thing* raises two powerful limbs, skin and bone and corded muscle, each hand with thumb and three slender, claw-tipped fingers sharp and bladed as knives, rests them either side of his head. Will stills. He doubts he'll like the consequences if he moves.

"This will hurt," Hannibal tells him. Plunges both thumbs into Will's forehead exactly between and above his eyes. The world narrows into agony.

Will arches his back and screams and screams and screams.



Will Graham wakes up the morning after viewing the ‘field kabuki’ scene with a splitting headache. He winces, and raises a hand to massage above and around his eyes, but it doesn’t really give him any relief. It isn’t as though this is a particularly uncommon state of affairs however, and the reason why he always keeps a bottle of aspirin on his person at all times.

Despite the pain, he still has to get up. Still has work to do. He’s just pottering around the shitty little motel kitchenette trying to make himself a cup of instant coffee when there’s a knock at the door. He pads over to answer it, narrowing his eyes against the mid-morning sun. He has slept much later than he intended, which is unlike him. He hopes it means something good, that he actually got a decent night’s sleep for once, but more likely it was just exhaustion catching up on him enough to drive any dreams out of his head in favour of solid, desperate, ineffectual rest.

Hannibal is at the door. Will squints at him. Something here feels... off. He has a swift moment of *déjà vu*, but it is quickly gone.

“Good morning Will,” the Godling says politely.

Will blinks. Feels like maybe he has had this conversation before. “Wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

“Jack was called away for business elsewhere. Acting on your previous advice, he has enlisted my services. I understand we have several construction sites to visit while we are in Minnesota. It shall be our adventure.” He smiles, and Will shudders. There is nothing particularly terrifying about that smile, and yet...

He shakes it off. They have work to do, and he is only half dressed.

A number of construction sites are a bust, but then things come together, just by chance, when Will sees the letter from Garrett Jacob Hobbs. There is something about it that just... fits. He doesn’t even know what; there’s little enough to go on, but he just knows that this is the man they are looking for. He gets a current address out of the site manager, pauses just long enough to pack up the files into the boot of his trunk – procedure must be followed, the chain of evidence preserved – and then he and Hannibal are off. He phones Jack on the way, filling him in on what they have learned. He can feel Hannibal’s gaze on him as they drive. It makes the tense excitement in his chest magnify even further.

They are going to catch this bastard who preys on his own kind, who has forced Will to slip into a viewpoint that sickens him, and then everything will go back to normal, to comforting cases and comforting emotions.

The Hobbs residence is out in the suburbs, on the edges of the development, almost in the woods. Sufficiently alienated from the general human population for a loner and a hunter, more comfortable with the animals he kills and his own hobbies than with social interactions. Will pulls into the driveway and gets out because although back-up is on the way, an unfamiliar car sitting and waiting is likely to make even the least paranoid killer nervous.

He’s unprepared for what happens next.

The door opens with a snap and a balding man in green pushes a woman out to tumble bonelessly onto the porch. Blood paints a shockingly crimson swath across her neck. Funny, Will’s mind

thinks absently through the shock, that even after so much exposure the sight of the fluid of life still has the power to stun him. The woman is making small, choked sounds as she struggles uselessly to stem the flow.

It's instinct to run to her, to try and *do* something. Utterly futile – as his fingers try to put pressure on the wound they sink into slashed tissue, hot wet meat, warm air brushing against their slick tips from her severed larynx. Her throat isn't just *cut*, it is *gaping*. Will breathes in his own sharp bursts as he fumbles, gathers scattered thoughts. Feels the life leaving her body as she goes still.

Snaps his head up as he realises that Hobb's wife is not the only member of the family to be in danger here.

There is still the daughter. The one who is the trigger for everything. The sacred sacrifice.

He reaches for the gun at his belt. Simple steel to slay a mortal man; they would never let him have iron. The grip becomes sticky with blood that mixes with his own sweat as he runs hot and cold, fear in his mouth and nerves that make the barrel inscribe circles into the air. He barges through the door, splintering the lock, sweeping the angles of corridors with body memory that lingers from old cop days.

“Garrett Jacob Hobbs!” He shouts. “FBI!”

He hears the terrified cries before he sees them. Rounds the corner and the tableau is laid out before him in a single moment made clear with adrenaline but not internalised beyond the seconds that it takes for both of them to act. The knife is drawn in an arc. Will's finger spasms and closes down upon the trigger.

The first bullet takes Hobbs in the right shoulder. He jerks, and the blade almost but not quite falls from his hand, and he stumbles back half a step. Yet he is too full of his own mix of endorphins and fear for the pain to have more than a fleeting effect. He veers forwards again, and Will's mind registers only threat, and he does not stop until the man is slumped back against his kitchen counter with at least half a dozen holes in him, collapsing down and limp and neutralised.

There is still the girl. She is still alive.

The cut has not gone the full width of her neck, but it has nicked the carotid on that left side and a thin stream of blood is spurting at a powerful pace onto the floor and the varnished pine of the cabinets. Her hair falls in a tangled curl like a spill of ink to match that spill of crimson that is quickly accumulating. Will falls to his knees next to her. Presses his hands into that hot gush like a burst pipe that he is entirely unqualified to fix.

He doesn't know how to make this right. Doesn't know how Hobbs divined their coming, although there are several possibilities if he had known the right rituals. Doesn't know why he chose to kill instead of run. Doesn't know what the fuck he thinks he's doing here with his palms slipping on fever-hot skin.

“See,” Hobbs hisses with dying breaths at his side. “See.”

He is not even aware that Hannibal has followed him into the house until large strong hands are gently brushing his own aside, fastening down competently and stemming the flow. Will looks up and the thought comes unbidden into his head; *No, Great Old Ones no, better she dies than to owe her life to him.*

He doesn't know where it comes from. It doesn't actually make any sense. He has hardly known Hannibal for any length of time at all, and the being has generally made a good impression thus far. Why would he be so afraid of him, of what association with him might mean?

"Will," Hannibal says, breaking him out of his shocked stupor. "Phone Jack. Tell him we'll need an ambulance."

For a moment the words are just so much noise. Then Hannibal repeats himself, more firmly, and dreamlike Will finds himself rising and doing as he has been instructed. He is covered, splattered, with human blood. It obscures his vision where it is drying on his glasses. He should take them off and wipe them clean, but his shirt is soiled too and would only make things worse.

When his task has been completed, he goes outside to sit on the hood of his car and wait for someone else to come and take charge.

The case has been wrapped up to everyone's satisfaction, perhaps most importantly that of the Royal Lady who seems quite pleased with a death as appropriate revenge for the murder of her pet. Abigail Hobbs – Abigail, that's her name, a name which makes everything that happened in those drawn out bloody moments real – is alive and back from the brink of death, and although she is currently in a coma, there is still hope for a full recovery. Will has been congratulated by a number of people. He isn't sure how to feel about that.

He has been present at violent apprehensions before. Difficult not to, in this line of work. But if they were human they were Restorationists, or had lost touch with sanity and were looking for revenge, or had lost someone close to them to Royal depredations, and they always went for the eldritch members of the team first. If they were of the Blood, then Will wasn't authorised to carry a weapon capable of taking them down. This is his first kill.

It is curdling in his stomach.

It could have been more humane. If he had more training in firearms, if he could have kept his cool better, if he could have managed a headshot or heartshot... The flashes of ten pulls of the trigger echo in his mind. The holes opening up in Hobbs' flesh. The pained jerk of his muscles.

At least Abigail is still alive. At least there's that; something good to come out of this whole mess. One girl's life saved. It is not nothing.

There are a few scraps of evidence left to deal with; the antlers and taxidermy equipment at the hunting cabin, the family's possessions at the house. With the death of the perpetrator however goes most of the impetus that led their unit to become involved in the first place. The case returns to its customary place, downgraded, a human who killed humans and who has been dealt with. It should be over entirely, and yet it is Will himself who cannot let go, much as he wants to.

He tries to talk it out of himself in his lectures. Although it is not the general purview of Jack's team, there are certainly some trainees in his audience who will be tasked to deal with this sort of crime, and they may benefit from the tale of it, learn something from how he handled it and the mistakes that he made. They may or may not care, being of the Blood.

He would have thought, though, that with the Lady's attention gone there would be no more talk of psychiatrists poking around in his brain. Will is rather put out to find that that is not the case. It

seems some too-wise individual higher up the food chain has divined, or guessed, or observed, the effect killing Hobbs has had on him, and believes his fragile little human mind will become too damaged if he does not get some help. They must agree with Jack that he is useful, or perhaps it is only Jack, lying to him. Whichever, they have Alana Bloom's support. They want to send him to Hannibal.

The thought of it is somehow both terrifying and – oddly – warming. But warming in the way of a fever, less than comfortable, less than healthy. Something as fascinating about it as a snake's hypnosis, but he can't see any reasons for anything that he is feeling. It makes no sense. He just knows that he doesn't want to go see or talk to anybody, even if they have given their word, as Hannibal has, not to mess with his mind, at least not by any other means than words. They can make him go to the appointments they make, but no-one can make him speak the truths he'd rather not voice.

Still. Still. He hasn't quite made his decision, and it turns out he won't until part way through the next case.

The crime scene is out in the middle of Jefferson National Forest, near confluences of power at Salem. Jack, Will and the team drive out, with a booking at a local motel ready if the case starts to drag out any length of time. They leave early in the morning and arrive around mid-afternoon, winding up narrow tracks between dark trees, bracketed by thick undergrowth. Their destination is a clearing in a valley that requires something of a trek down to it. It is not designed to be easy. You must want to find this place.

Will steps into the open and is immediately drawn to the massive stone idol squatting in the centre of the dell. It is moss-covered and rain-weathered, features mostly lost to time. Probably better that such is the case. It has enough power, just looking at the strange, alien features, fat belly, long lolling carven tongue, that he would not like to see it as it once was. It makes his eyes hurt, seems to move under his gaze, warp, gather shadows and highlights and textures, a thing both real and not.

It takes him a little longer to become aware of the corpse that concerns them.

It hangs from its heels, pinned to the idol by a single long iron spear that pierces behind both Achilles tendons. The strength required to sink metal into stone is more than any human could manage. The body is limp, having stiffened with rigor mortis that has now long since faded. The arms dangle, bound with a length of thorned vine. The throat has been opened back to the spine, letting the muddy ichor splatter down the statue's paunch into the bowl carved into the hollow of its crossed legs. Four dead ink-black eyes stare from the drained-pale face. Flies buzz, fat and massive. This newest sacrifice falls onto a mass of old crusted blood, but that is the coagulated brown of humans. A Godling offering is new.

The being that called it in is one of the park Rangers, typically tasked with watching over this site. He waits nervously by the treeline, twisting long, spindly, webbed, fingers. He is a thin-blood with a definite resemblance to a frog; pallid, slimy, fleshy, with dangling jowls that bulge in and out with his breathing. He scurries over when Jack beckons.

"Tell us how you found the body," Jack says.

“Normal procedure for offerings is they gotta come through the Ranger Office by the main road, so we can check their authorisation, you know? No-one’s been in for a while though, and we really only look over the site after a sacrifice for disposal. I only came because I thought I felt something at dusk last night. Like... a change in the air. Felt suspicious. I found it like this.”

Jack nods his thanks and sends the creature away. He turns back to look over the scene, and Will copies him. The Science Trio are already setting up the basics, cordoning off the area, but the stasis charms won’t be cast until he has done what he can. The ambient energies of the spells can throw him off sometimes.

“Don’t expect much Jack,” he warns. “I can already tell you this was one of the Blood, and you know I’m not... good... at getting into their heads.”

“Anything you can give us will help,” the Agent replies, clapping him on the shoulder a little too hard for comfort. Will sighs, straightens his spine, begins to sink down into his place of concentration as the others move back into the woods out of his line of sight. His headache is twinging again, needle-sharp stabs across his forehead and behind his eyes. He massages them as he pulls his glasses off and tucks them away. Pops another aspirin. Not that they seem to be helping much today.

Time spools backwards. Blood ascends, wounds close, the spear vanishes. He steps backwards to the edge of the clearing before restarting the clock.

Will is carrying a wriggling burden slung over his shoulder, but the weight is little to him. The lesser Godling is tossed to the ground in front of the God. Patron. Source of power. Crushing jaws open and laugh. (Not a detail he should know. Not appearance. But the confusion isn’t enough to snap him out of it.) This pitiful thin-blood is weak enough to be almost mortal. Doesn’t deserve even the slightest lick of power stolen away in veins. Hawthorn is an easy binding. The prey whimpers.

Foolish relative. Same progenitor, centuries back. Purity of Bloodline long since lost. Can become more pure in letting ichor spill to Father-Mother-God and accepting the gift that comes in return. Easy enough with long arms to hoist mewling creature up by legs and drive blessed spear through pathetic, rotting-mortal flesh. Pleasant screams. Begging. More proof of weakness.

Copper blade to throat as sun sinks past horizon point. Rush of power into hungry belly. Stink on air, animal. It is done, and done well.

Will blinks clear of the mental images. Returns to the light of day and the limp consequence of their killer’s actions. He feels off-balance. Like his thoughts are not entirely his own, an experience which is unfamiliar when compared to the borrowed skins and motivations of human murderers. This mind doesn’t seem entirely... normal, in its alchemy inside his brain. He tilts his head and for a moment thinks he can see a slow river of ugly light trickling down the ichor residue on the idol’s belly.

This is not... This is new. And not in any good way. Normally if he starts to delve into a Godling’s head-space it is instinctual to shy away and break the connection as soon as he starts to experience the world in a way that’s incompatible with human thought. He can’t – or shouldn’t be able to – empathise with the input of senses he’s never had, with motivations of predator and power and things beyond the scope of the mortal world. Just observing the creatures around him has taught him that their actions don’t necessarily make sense in a way contingent with human definitions of

sanity, and he has never wanted to risk becoming one of those shells of things he has seen occasionally on necessary visits to near-Royal Godlings' homes.

Will doesn't know what to make of what has just happened. Of the fact that he went deeper than intended, that he even could. He can feel his breathing begin to speed up as he considers the implications. He turns around, some instinct telling him to flee, but then Jack is there with a steady hand and a look of expectation.

Will tells him what he has been able to pick up, but filtered and presented in a way not so different from the deductions he has made in the past. His headache has at least lessened slightly, but he feels too open. Laid bare. Almost, in some strange and metaphysical way, naked.

He doesn't know who to talk to about it. But he has the first session with Hannibal – unavoidable – coming up in a few days. He pushes away the irrational fear the thought wakes in him. Hannibal had seemed... sensible. Capable of concealing a secret in confidence, if the necessity of it was pressed upon him. Will had noticed, in the calm way he watched the interplay between himself and Jack, that the being had almost a kind of disdain for the Agent, and the job the Lady had set him on against his will. It's possible he can be persuaded to hold some information back.

Yes. It could be the only safe option. All Will knows is that he really doesn't want for this experience to become a common occurrence.

Hannibal's office is... uncomfortable. On the surface it ought to be nice – it certainly looks refined, like it's had some serious money spent on it, at least by Will's standards which are, to be frank, not that impressive. Just the rows and rows of books the line the upper half of the room, up on the damn balcony that runs three-quarters of the way around, must have taken some time and expense to acquire. The rest of it, unfamiliar artefacts from unfamiliar cultures, fashionable furniture... Will doesn't know enough about the art of interior design to put a price tag on it.

Perhaps it is just that this place is clearly meant for people more socially advanced than he is that's making him uneasy. Will never thought himself the kind of man who would be bothered by that sort of thing, but he has had little chance to test that theory. And yet... His skin is prickling in cold sweats, and there's a bitter taste at the back of his mouth. Something is not right, and it is nothing as simple as décor.

Will finds himself retreating up the stairs to the mezzanine with the excuse of academic curiosity. Hannibal watches him with those flat, red-brown eyes, listening politely as he stumbles over his stammered justification. He lets Will alone to turn his back and browse for a while. From the noise of a pen scratching, plus the quick look Will throws over his shoulder, the being is signing some document lying on his desk. Hannibal brings it over, standing at the point just below Will, but far enough out that he won't have to crick his neck to look up at him.

"What's that?" Will asks. He might have come here with the express intent to discuss his empathy, but now the time has come, he is reluctant. Reluctant to be here at all, reluctant to extend trust. Suspicion wriggles nervous in the centre of his brain. An instinct screams fight or flight, for no discernible reason, and Will has always tended towards the latter.

"Your psychological evaluation," Hannibal replies. "You're totally functional, and more or less sane. Well done."

If anything, this only makes him more uneasy. “You’re rubber-stamping me? Why?”

“Because that is what Jack and his superiors want to hear,” Hannibal says. Will has been unable to keep from noticing that he very rarely blinks, though from time to time a clear membrane will slowly slide across his eyes from corner to corner. It makes the thin-blooded psychiatrist seem more lizard than man, which may have some truth depending on his far-back progenitor. “They have no use for answers that are not in black and white, and I have found that the psyche of the human is very rarely a black and white entity.”

“So it’s for my benefit,” Will says. “Still doesn’t explain why *you* are doing it. Why you care about making things easy for a human FBI employee.”

“I wouldn’t be a very good psychiatrist if I didn’t care about my patients, now would I?”

The statement seems to hold the ring of truth to it, and it would fit with what he had said earlier in Jack’s office. So why does Will find himself so unwilling to take Hannibal’s words at face value? It can’t be just because he is one of the Blood; if Will were this suspicious of all their kind, he would never have lasted any time at all in the FBI with his sanity intact. Loneliness and paranoia would have eaten him long ago.

“I can sense that there are other subjects that you wish to discuss,” Hannibal continues, “and I do not wish this particular issue to stand in the way of that.”

Will would like to explain that the mandatory evaluation is not actually the thing that’s doing that, but the words won’t come out. This doesn’t bode well to getting what he really wants some advice and reassurance about off his chest.

“What is it that is bothering you Will?” Hannibal asks.

“I suppose Jack or someone thinks killing Hobbs fucked me up,” Will says, pacing along the balcony as he gathers his thoughts and tries to force his fear down. “And I’m not about to say that’s not true. It affected me, yes, but I’m going to get over it, just like I’ve dealt with all my other problems over the past few years. I might be human, but that doesn’t make me weak.”

“It bothers you that some people think otherwise.”

“It would bother anyone,” Will replies, scowling. “If I couldn’t do the work Jack asks of me, I wouldn’t *be* here. Even if that means occasionally I have to kill a human criminal, well, he of all people deserved it, for what he did.”

“Preying on his own kind, you mean.”

Will is not expecting Hannibal to put his own line of reasoning out in the open like that. He hadn’t thought himself to be so obvious. Oddly, despite his lurking mistrust, he doesn’t believe that Hannibal has broken his word and poked around in his head. Whatever his other suspicions, he doesn’t think the being would do that.

“Exactly,” Will says. “It’s... it’s a betrayal.” Hannibal is looking at him curiously. Will shrugs away from the odd, piercing quality of his single-tone eyes. “That’s not what I came here to talk about anyway.”

“Perhaps a topic for another time then. Tell me about what has been concerning you currently.”

“It’s the latest case.” Will explains the facts in the barest of terms, as well as what he was able to glean from the site. “I’ve never experienced it that way before. If I model how a criminal thinks, it’s a layer over the top of my own thoughts. I don’t *become* them, not like that. And I’ve never... I’ve never gotten anything *like* as much detail from a Godling before. It shouldn’t be possible!”

Hannibal is very still as he takes this in. Another peculiarity of his, this utter lack of movement until he is called on particularly by circumstances to react to something. Or, like a predator, Will’s mind supplies, until the time has come to strike.

“Should this new advancement in your abilities not be a cause for celebration?” Hannibal asks, half-rhetorically. “Surely it can only be an advantage in your particular line of work?”

“No!” Will replies, very emphatic on this point. “If my brain is doing something outside of what’s normal, that means there is something *wrong*. Wrong is dangerous. There has to be a reason for this, and since I haven’t been doing anything different, that means the source is either outside me, which means someone could be messing about in my head, or it is *inside* me, and that’s not much better! I’m sure you of all your kind are aware that humans have this little thing called sanity that we value quite highly, and I don’t want to lose mine!”

“What is it about this experience in particular that has worried you so much?” Hannibal asks. His lack of reaction to Will’s outburst is probably meant to be calming; Will just finds it creepy. It’s strange in the extreme to have his logic and his instincts so much at war with each other over this thin-blood.

“Does it need to be anything other than the fact it has never. Happened. Before?”

Hannibal cocks his head very slightly to one side. It shouldn’t make him look any more reptilian – it’s not strictly an inhuman gesture – and yet it does. “I would say this is connected to your last case. It was that Hobbs acted in a way contrary to the idea of humanity that angered you most about him. You are afraid that if you are capable of empathising with those of the Blood, it means you yourself are departing from humanity. Have you considered that it might be *because* of your fear that you have unlocked this within yourself?”

Will barks out a quick burst of sudden laughter, surprised from his throat. “No Doctor, no, I had not considered that. And frankly, I think you’re reaching.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal allows, with a hint of a smile. “But if there is any truth to my supposition, consider that the ability to assume the point of view of one of us is an addition, not a subtraction, of who you are. I believe that you must have a very certain self-image, Will, or you would have lost yourself already a long time ago.”

Will makes no reply to that. Nothing seems entirely sufficient. He can only hope that in this case Hannibal is right. The alternatives are not, after all, pleasant to think about.

Will’s appointment had been a late one, so it is not that long before he calls it a night back in Wolf Trap, gathers his dogs, and heads off to the dubious comforts of sleep. His headache has been creeping on and off all day, and now is a persistent ache behind the eyes. The centre of his forehead has taken on an odd, tingling quality like pins and needles, a curious paraesthesia that isn’t relieved by any attempt to rub it away.

He drops off quickly though, for all that.

Will dreams of the crimson full moon, lying heavy over a jungle swamp. He is reminded of the bayous of Louisiana as a child; a ramshackle house on the periphery, liminal between the primeval claimed by the Blood, and the society that bows to Them. Fat mosquitoes buzzing in the night, lying on a narrow bed sticky with sweat, not needing the bare sheet that was all the cover available. Exploring, but never going too far, staring out over still, dark waters into the wilder places changed and made fierce by the long habitation of Royalty and its descendants.

This swamp is old, and the air heavy with wet heat. The pools reflect the crimson light from the sky like an expanse of blood, and the rotting of plants makes them smell as foul, in a different way. Will is not bothered by his surroundings though, for in this dreamscape he is not as he truly is. Stocky and slimy-skinned, his feet wide and unwieldy flippers, looking at the world as through a fish-eye lens, he is aware of himself as Other.

A massive dragonfly, iridescent on flickering wings, hovers above the water in front of him.

Instinct propels the tongue from his mouth, a tossed rope on a spring. The insect is reeled inside the gape of his maw and Will bites down with long rows of carnivore teeth to find it crunchy and sweet. Only a far-off, half-lucid part of himself registers this as odd.

He drops down into the swamp and kicks out, a strong stroke that propels him fast through the water. He is hunting for more.

The case of the Godling sacrifice is proceeding slowly. Whatever insights Will's profile can give, first there must be a pool of suspects to apply it to, and that is easier said than done. There is a particularly high population of the Blood in the area nearest the park, in Salem and its environs. Not surprising, given the psychic power the city obtained in the imaginations of humanity in times past, now codified into reality by the world-altering abilities of Royalty. Considering the shape of the idol the sacrifice was given to, they are operating on the assumption that their perpetrator has an amphibian ancestry, but there's never been a proper census of Elder-kin they could use to narrow things down. That's never been an interest of He Who Presides Over The New World, and thus rarely a priority in His Nobility.

Will's dreams, in the meantime, have been bothering him. In all of his nightmares before, no matter how terrible, he has always retained his humanity mentally no matter the vagaries of physical form forced on him by the circumstances. Changing has been a source of horror. It has never before felt natural.

He lays the blame squarely at the feet of the alteration in his empathy, at getting too far inside the head of their murderer. Perhaps Hannibal's confidence in Will's self-image was misplaced. In everyday life, he has felt as much himself as ever, but he is at his most powerless at night, and he worries he is slipping. Towards what, he doesn't know, but he fears it.

As to the Hobbs' case, well... The ghost of it still sticks under his skin. He has been going to visit Abigail Hobbs in her hospital room, not sure what exactly he hopes to gain by it. Even if she does wake up whilst he's there, Will can't imagine her reaction towards him would be anything positive. He shot her father, and it won't matter that Hobbs was trying to kill her at the time, or had killed many others. Family bonds are not rational in that way. Will might not have much experience with family himself, but even he has some idea of how they generally work.

He is less convinced of any causal link between that case and this latest one. But it has been a week, and he is due another appointment, so maybe he and Hannibal will end up discussing it the coming evening. He still feels more uncomfortable than not about the idea of going to see the psychiatrist, an irrational phobia like a little voice screaming inside the back of his skull, but it was vaguely helpful talking to him the last time, so he's willing to give it another try.

"How is this latest case Jack has you on proceeding?" Hannibal asks politely.

"Not much progress so far," Will replies. He has managed to resist the urge to retreat to the balcony level this time around. Still, he's too much on edge to sit in any of the chairs, no matter how comfortable-looking. "None of the usual spells and rituals have turned up any evidence, and there's little enough to go on from the physical side either."

"And your profile?"

"Not much use yet." He hesitates, fighting reluctance. Surely it's only his natural distrust of letting anyone so much as peek inside his head that's making him feel this way. Will has made his decision to extend some measure of trust to this being, on the strength of Alana's character reference and his calming manner, and he wishes his instincts would catch up. "That's partly what I wanted to speak to you about today. I've been having these dreams."

Hannibal leans back against his desk, posture open, obviously encouraging him to continue.

Will explains the swamp, the hunting behaviour, how he was not himself, but a Godling. How he is worried that he is starting to lose his hold on himself whilst weakened in the grip of sleep. That this is an entirely new phenomenon, and frightening because of it.

"But in the dreams themselves, you were not frightened," Hannibal notes.

Will shakes his head. Indeed that is the problem, source of the creeping horrors of realisation that come when day breaks.

"Then perhaps this can be seen as another beneficial side effect," the thin-blood suggests. "Your glimpse into a Godling's psyche may have expanded your world-view enough to reduce the psychic toll of your dreams. This is not necessarily to say that you are becoming any more *like* one of my kind, merely that you have become aware of ways of looking at the world which allow you to be more mentally flexible."

"I'm sorry Doctor," Will replies, "but I'm going to look on anything that takes me even a little way away from humanity as a bad thing."

"Even if it has demonstrable advantages?"

"Unlike some people, I've never had the desire to be anything other than what I am."

"Commendable in and of itself." Hannibal says. "Well then, tell me what you were able to pick up from this murderer. Discussing the case may allow you to arrive at some helpful insight for Jack. Finishing and moving on to the next may be the best way to resolve the issues you are having."

“Okay,” Will replies, rubbing his hands together and changing the tracks of his mind to his working mentality. Hannibal may have personal insights, as one of the Blood, although it’s perhaps unlikely that one of the FBI Godlings wouldn’t already have considered them. “So I know our perp is of amphibious ancestry with a fair amount of power behind him. Certainly more than the victim had. He sees the killing as the natural result of a higher-order predator picking off the weak, but more than that, there’s some resentment there for the thin-bloods that are more human at this point than eldritch-kind. He doesn’t believe they deserve to be counted part of the Great Old Ones’ kin, or to have whatever small abilities they do possess.”

“It seems to me that you already have an excellent grasp of this individual’s psychology,” Hannibal notes mildly.

“It might not have occurred to me before,” Will says. “I’ve never perceived... a distinction between you. Not so fine.”

“All of us frighten you. There was no need to differentiate to such a degree between threats.”

Will’s mouth flattens into a thin line, anger bitter on the tip of his tongue. Unwilling to admit the truth of it.

“It’s a natural reaction,” Hannibal says. “Nothing to be ashamed of. To address the point; the inner politics of the Blood are certainly as bloodthirsty and complex as any dealings with humanity. A predator’s nature is not constrained merely outside their species. Most simply do not have the abilities to act as they might wish.”

“I’m not sure how much help that is,” Will admits. “There are too many possible suspects in the area, and we can’t narrow anything down without a lot more to go on. We need some *scrap* of physical evidence or we’ll never get anywhere.”

“Have you made the case public yet?”

“It broke to the papers a few days ago. There didn’t seem to be any reason to be particularly secretive.”

“A pity,” Hannibal says. “Consider the power your killer must have gained from a Godling sacrifice. That is an addictive sort of drug. Likely he has done this before, and will do so again. It might have been possible to stake out the scene in anticipation of his returning. Now he will be quiescent for a while, until the furore has died down. However, the new moon is next week. This provides an opportunity that would be hard to pass up. Perhaps your killer will go somewhere else to make his sacrifice.”

“Stake out possible areas and wait.” Will continues the line of reasoning. It might work – Hannibal’s analysis rings true. It’s certainly a better lead than any they’ve got so far.

“Our time is almost up,” Hannibal notes, looking at his watch. “I do hope I have been helpful to you.”

“Yes, thank you.” And for a few moments at least, the unfamiliar pleasure of discussing his work had managed to suppress the strange feeling of wariness that still plagues Will in the thin-blood’s presence. Hannibal might be odd, and one of the Blood besides, but Will finds himself in some way drawn to his company despite that.

For the moment, he has a suggestion to put to Jack.

The days tick on towards the new moon, and pass sticky and hot into autumn with the feverish accompaniment of Will's new dreams. Always similar, and taking the place of his accustomed, familiar nightmares, he becomes used to waking in the morning feeling ill-fitting in his own skin, clammy with sweat but never enough to match the damp-hide self stalking those primeval swamps.

Aside from his work for Jack, which currently consists merely of the waiting game Hannibal's suggestion has set them to, his day job continues. Lectures are comfortable, and do not require too much of his attention by this point. Although Will has made it a point of pride to keep his courses fresh with examples from his own experience, it is easier for now to fall back on the preparations of previous years, with only minor modifications. Perhaps it is the heat that seems to invade his bedroom at night, but he finds himself drained, lethargic.

One thing he does not lack is spare time. Fishing doesn't seem to appeal, and he can only run the dogs through the woods around his house so many times before the familiarity of the route erases exercise's quieting effect on his thoughts, and he begins to dwell on things he would rather not.

He knows it isn't really wise, but he finds himself increasing his visits to Abigail Hobbs' bedside. She never seems to change, the ventilator breathing for her in long, slow gasps, her chest rising and falling in time with it, the monitors beeping in their quiet, monotonous way. Someone has left a small devotional idol at her bedside – Will wants to throw it away, but lacks the courage to touch it, as though merely by doing so he will reveal something about himself better concealed.

It's one such occasion when he stays for longer than he meant to, curled up on his side watching her from the visitor's couch. He doesn't realise that he has fallen asleep there until the creature walks past the open doorframe. He recognises it from a few weeks back, before the swamp-dreams, and remembers his fear of it. Lucid, he can at least be a little thankful for the change in subject. Then curiosity, or some other draw that he cannot quite quantify has him rising and following.

The hospital corridor darkens around him, lights flickering and snapping off, the beast a shadow of shape turning a corner ahead. The feathers of its hide are splayed, making it seem even more massive. Will stands there, not wanting to go on, equally trapped in a growing fear of what is behind him, cosseted in blackness. He imagines he feels the whisper of breath on his shoulder, but his muscles have become water, immobile.

There is tapping, like the sound of the stag's hooves, without clear direction and filling the air around him.

His breath starts to come faster as it comes nearer.

Then the dream shatters, breaks apart into soft-edged shards and he surfaces slowly, become aware as he does so that someone is reading aloud. A story he doesn't recognise, in a voice he does.

It's Alana Bloom.

Alana is primarily avian. A chaos of wings and limbs, a bright flurry of peacock feather here, soft dove-grey there, swan-white at another place. She does not take up space like some Royals – or near-Royals – do. She is very self-contained. Rather she does not exist all at once, so that on

moving parts of her body will seem to appear and disappear, or move through one another in a way that's uncomfortable to look at.

"What are you reading?" Will asks. She turns her head on a long sinuous neck to look at him. A falcon's beak moves in a way something solid ought not be able to in order to smile.

"Flannery O'Connor. A human author, but I've always been fond. An interest in morality, and characters with the ring of truth. And she kept peacocks."

"I didn't realise you knew about this case."

"Jack asked me to assess your state of mind before I referred him to Hannibal."

Will shifts, realising he now has a sheet-blanket draped over him. A curiously human gesture.

"Why didn't you do it?"

"Because we're friends." Said as though Alana genuinely hadn't conceived of acting any other way. Is that true? Or just playing at humanity, the way she thinks that means?

"And Abigail?"

"It must be very sad, losing your whole family like that. I'm sympathetic, even if I can't know what she went through." Her plumage moves as if there's a breeze to ruffle the feathers. They flash in iridescent, beautiful patterns. Mesmerising, if you look at them the wrong way. "It would be nice if she woke up. A little less tragedy."

Will wonders if it really would be. At least in this state Abigail doesn't have to face the reality of everything her father did and the losses she's suffered. She can be at peace, although the peace of a coma is a poor sort of peace to have.

"Go back to sleep, Will," Alana says. "You look like you need it. I'll keep watch."

Despite his protests, Will is not able to be there when the trap closes around their killer. Their target is deemed too dangerous, and he too human. He would only get in the way, he is told. It makes him angry, because isn't it partly down to him that they even have this opportunity? If he hadn't discussed it with Hannibal in the first place... But really, this is more about closure. Until he can confront the creature whose head he climbed inside, he can't purge it out.

With a feeling of inevitability, he confronts the later news that the Godling was killed resisting arrest. Not surprising given its psychology, but viewing a sprawled corpse will do nothing for Will. The animus is gone, and with it, the opportunity to turn borrowed thoughts back on themselves. Through seeing, understanding, and through understanding, removing the need for his particular brand of divination.

Frustrated, Will calls Hannibal to make an emergency appointment. If he cannot be rid of the murderer through his normal means, he will exorcise him with words. Inefficient, but he has been left with no other option.

They meet under cover of evening darkness, gathered soft and secretive outside the windows of Hannibal's office with their barber-striped curtains. Will allows a little more familiarity, letting the

comfortable chair envelop him, preventing him from any sudden movements. The unease that still refuses suppression makes itself known in fidgeting, small twitches. Waiting to run. His fingers grip the padded arms with white-knuckle force. Hannibal is polite enough not to bring it up.

“The case has been solved, but you are not satisfied,” the psychiatrist says instead. He reads body-language well.

“Still have too much knocking around up here,” Will replies, tapping his forehead. “I can’t get it out properly now he’s dead.”

“Like the Hobbs case.”

Will laughs, self-depreciatingly. “Back to that. I’m trying not to think about it too much. I need to sort it out in my own mind before I talk about it.” Ignoring the fact that he hasn’t even been trying. Suppression seems to work better.

“But that is not the case with your latest problem.”

He is being avoidant, Will knows, but there’s a difference between coming here with the intention of talking about a subject, and it being ordered on him. Hannibal signed him off on the matter, which gives him all the excuse he needs. Hobbs is more... personal. Because it was his own kill, or because of the confusing mix of emotions he picked up from his analysis of the man, or because of Abigail he’s not sure. He just knows that even if Hannibal was there for a good part of it, he’s not ready to discuss it with one of the Blood, even so atypical a creature as Hannibal is.

“Why not talk about a Godling *with* a Godling?” Will says, deflecting.

“Why not indeed.” Hannibal smiles. He’s not much better at making it look human than he was the last time. “Parts of your internal view of yourself changed under the influence of this killer. The role of the predator makes you uncomfortable.”

“It doesn’t come naturally,” Will explains. “It’s not *human*. It makes me feel like a stranger.”

“Surely some of the humans you have investigated in the past, these Restorationists, thought of themselves as predators?”

“More like hunters. Vigilantes. They want revenge; they don’t consider themselves exactly superior to Godlings, mostly they just hate them. Predators don’t hate their prey. They just don’t see it as equal.”

“And you’re comfortable with those feelings of hate,” Hannibal says. Will parses, realises the implications, and his fight or flight instinct stutters, momentarily paralysed like an animal in a headlights. The corners of Hannibal’s eyes crinkle with amusement, but he is not quite so callous as to laugh at Will’s terror. “You need have no fear that I will reveal your secret. It matters little to me.”

The fear passes into a moment of perfect calm. It’s almost funny, how having his truths exposed and cast into the dangers of illumination, wipes away his horror at discovery. He was expecting much worse. It’s anti-climactic.

“You don’t care that I’ve fantasised about killing your kind?” he asks, now full of a heady boldness, sinking back into the chair easing muscles tense with what had been the readiness to bolt.

“Will, *I* have fantasised about killing my own kind. It’s in my nature,” Hannibal replies, with equal calmness. “And I doubt I personally have anything to fear from you.”

“It’s still treason. You’d be rewarded for turning me in.”

“Not so much as to make breaking my vows of confidentiality worthwhile. The principles of my vocation are important to me.”

Will does his best to analyse the words, to put them to the test of his empathy, but Hannibal is like a deep, still pool, a mirror giving nothing away. He could be being perfectly honest, unexpected as that might seem. Or he could be lying. It’s impossible to tell. In the end, Will hasn’t much choice but to trust him. What other option does he have?

“You fear becoming a predator because you do not wish to think of humans as you do the Blood,” Hannibal continues. “How did it feel, to re-live that Godling sacrifice?”

“It felt good,” Will admits. “But I would rather have experienced it as a human than as that Godling.”

“You kill through your empathy, but will not risk acting yourself. Would you, if the opportunity presented itself?”

“I don’t think I could.” Too much to lose. Too intimate a knowledge of what his fate would be if he was caught.

“You killed Hobbs. How did that compare?”

“I said I’d rather not talk about that.”

“You’ll have to eventually.” And that’s true, but it will be on Will’s own terms. He needs to centre himself, forge a kind of peace with Hobbs’ ghost. Work out what his feelings are for Abigail, and his intentions. Admittedly he needs to build trust as well. Hannibal still feels slightly off to him, although if he can keep this dangerous secret...

“But now is not the time,” Hannibal concedes.

“You’ve still been... helpful.”

“I do not think you need to worry as much as you do about this change in your empathy, or where it might lead. I have confidence in your strength. Use this to your advantage. Fear only holds you back.”

Will is open to considering it. He is very used to letting that particular emotion stand as his primary motivator, and he remains convinced in his belief that it has kept him alive thus far. It would be less stressful if he could relax from time to time though. If he could allow himself to stop worrying. Bizarrely, the secret he now shares with Hannibal is a weight off his mind, rather than yet another thing to haunt his nights. He shouldn’t be so confident about a promise of silence.

“You have the potential to be something more than you are. Do not hide from it.”

Hannibal believes strange things about him. Will doesn’t think his empathy is anything of particular note, set beside what Godlings can call on. He would rather remain under the radar where it’s safe.

When his time is up, he has been given several things to consider. He's a little nervous, now he has time to think about it, at just how easy it was for Hannibal to read him. Particularly considering his promise not to go poking around in Will's head. Is he really so obvious? If so, why has no-one else picked up on it yet? Or perhaps they have, and Jack and the team have said nothing because they are protecting him. It's not something he can just ask about.

Will consoles himself with the thought that Hannibal has made the study of humans his specialty. Probably most Godlings wouldn't be interested enough to make a note of whatever quirk of body language and reactions gave him away. Hannibal is just... unique.

Talking must have helped in some way though, because when he falls asleep that night, his nightmares are quiet and familiar, and there is not a swamp to be found.

The Hobbs girl first piqued Hannibal's curiosity when her life-blood flowed over the seeming of his thin-blood hands and told him her story. Self lapped him lightly, bitter with old fears, sharp with new ones. Youngling killer. Little murderer. Bait in trap to snap sharp closed on girls with mirrored faces. Has partaken in the flesh with father-kin. Eaten of that which is forbidden, set blunt human-teeth to human-meats, made pact with darkness grown in older heart. Survived.

He can admire that. Strength to choose necessary over right, to walk thin line that let her live, to look unflinching into mortal mockery of void. Huntress herself, predator and prey both, she is the doe that devours itself. Hannibal had let true-self hidden smile, viewed futures and added on to current plans. New target to make his own. Worthy.

She sleeps now. Healing sleep, to build up what was close to broken. Would not do for future worshiper, future Priestess, to die and waste little flicker of life. He guides and guards dreams, confronts with truth, allows the happenings contextualised and made safer, comprehended and assimilated and forged into psyche as steel and strength. Girl Abigail must overcome petty human traumas; they matter little. Hannibal has better ambitions for her, knowing also significance she may hold for future Prophet William. Tender and precious, she is daughter-claimed, he is father-protector. Hannibal has become protector also, an amusing fact. It is held in expectation of reciprocation in future, in the way of Gods. Worship reaps its benefits, as long as it may be worth the boon of not devouring.

Dreaming-time must of necessity be soon ending. Muscles and bones waste with inactivity, and whilst mind strengthens, body becomes less. Bound by the physical, utter inconvenience. Still. Start of the game. Players three. Abigail, Will, Royal self. Watching through borrowed eyes of little statue-self, left for influence's sake by side of bed. Time to wake.

Time to wake.

Chapter 3

Will hears first that Abigail Hobbs has come out of her coma from Alana Bloom. She arrives outside his house with a near-silent flutter of wings, having walked through spaces in the world barred to anyone with a more prosaic understanding of physics and geometry. At the time he is just letting the dogs out to fulfil their morning needs. They bark loudly, and whine, and growl, and quickly retreat back inside. Alana watches their flight with curiosity, and perhaps a little disappointment.

The dawn light is ill and sickly. It seems to bend around Alana, and shines from her feathers like an oil-slick. She greets him with a chirp of ‘Good morning’, far more alert than he is at this hour. He becomes uncomfortably aware that he is clad only in his sleeping clothes; sweat-stained white T-shirt and threadbare boxers. He feels vulnerable, even though more layers would only have psychological benefit. Alana certainly doesn’t mean him harm anyway.

“Do you want a cup of coffee?” He offers, then being direct as he knows she prefers; “And more immediately, why are you here?”

“Yes, and Abigail Hobbs woke up.”

Will halts on the edge of the porch, unsure how he ought to be reacting. He’d been half-expecting it coming, but strangely hadn’t prepared for it psychologically at all. His emotions don’t know what to do with themselves. “I should... I should go and see her,” he says, fumbling over himself, the complicated tangle inside his skull.

“I thought you might want to,” Alana replies. “A decision hasn’t yet been made to appoint her a guardian, but she’ll need one. There’s already talk at the hospital about where she might better be placed.”

“So physically she’s fine,” Will deduces. “Look, I’m going to get my coat. We can get that promised coffee on the way.”

“Don’t rush into anything Will. This would be a big responsibility. Either Hannibal or myself would be willing to share the burden with you.”

Taking a moment to think about it *would* be wise, he can’t deny that. He’s feeling paternal enough that the choice seems obvious, but now he takes a moment to consider, and thinks about what Abigail herself might want. How much does she remember? Will can imagine how the image of himself bursting into the kitchen might have embedded behind her eyes – the slayer of the monster her father had become, but still Hobbs had been her father. Family. If she’d rather just reject him out of hand, then Alana might be the better fit for the job.

He can’t imagine Hannibal as anyone’s guardian. It makes him unsettled. It strikes him as a very bad idea, though he can’t exactly quantify why.

“Would you rather... talk to her first?” Will asks.

“It might be better,” Alana says gently.

He nods, shaky, poised on his threshold still. The allure of the concept – becoming Abigail’s guardian – is beating wild beneath his shuddering heart, but he has control. He won’t jump in and mess this up.

“Good. I just thought you should be one of the first to know.” Alana slips between the light and is gone with a burst of colour that forces Will to turn his head away. He sighs, and goes back inside. This whole situation has the potential to get very complicated.

He needs that coffee.

A lot has changed since she was asleep, Abigail thinks, sitting in the taxi that’s been arranged to take her to wherever she’ll be staying now. They weren’t very clear about it, at the hospital. They’d said she had to move, that she wasn’t sick anymore so she couldn’t keep on taking up a bed, and they had packed up all her things into a suitcase she remembers her mother buying her for a family holiday years ago. Now she’s just... in transit.

Apparently the man who shot her dad works for the FBI, in the Behavioural Analysis Unit of the Eldritch Crimes Division, which means not very much. It’s not clear, or no-one would tell her, why *they* were even involved at all. But since her dad is dead, it’s all over. As far as anyone cares, the case is closed. She should be thankful. It means her own part in events is never going to be uncovered. It’s impossible to be happy though. Her whole family is... gone. Just like that.

Abigail rolls the little idol she found in her room back and forth in her hands, staring out the window of the car at the passing countryside. It’s not a God she recognises, even though she’s been brought up well and her father was devout. Every Friday to the temple of He Who Presides Over The New World, letting little trickles of shed blood drip from slashed palms. Bowing to the great statue and offering up their worship. She remembers classes, as a child, reciting the names of the Great Old Ones, the World-Rulers. The True Royals. Committing depictions of their aspects to memory, even though the pages made her eyes burn and weep tears of blood.

Was Dad trying to show respect to Them, eating all those girls, making her eat them too? Making use of every part of them so it wasn’t murder?

The little idol is comforting though, Whomever it is. Abigail is glad to have *something*, because otherwise she is entirely at sea. Everything has changed, nothing is the same, and she doesn’t know who she is anymore.

The new place turns out to be a psychiatric hospital, which makes her mouth thin in distaste. Only people too weak to accept the Great Ones’ gifts end up in places like this, or that’s what she’s always been taught. Preachers in temples, on street-corners, slipping through the cracks to live the lives of Holy Ones caught up entire in the truth of the universe, of reality, of the uncaring, stark nature of life (a flickering light in the darkness, easily extinguished)... that’s how it should be. Not rejection, trying to go back, to fix what doesn’t need fixing.

She hasn’t been given any truth anyway, so she doesn’t know why she’s here. She just wants to go home.

There’s nothing for it though but to collect her things, to be herded inside (at least the building is nice) and up to the room they’ve given her, to unpack what little she has in the way of clothes that someone had scooped up uncaring from home, and make the place look even more empty because

of it. She'd seen a few bookcases on the way in, against the walls of probably the recreation room, since it had a television, and a stack of board-games, and lots of space around chairs and tables and couches. There's things to do, at least. She won't be *too* bored out of her mind.

Perhaps that's how it works. You come here to learn the true pointlessness of your existence, and once that's been realised and your mind has fixed on it they let you out and see which God accepts you, having been made more pleasant to their tastes. Abigail supposes that might be alright.

She puts the idol in pride of place on her dresser, and waits for someone to come and give her the induction she knows is inevitable. Maybe she can persuade the staff here to tell her some more about the FBI's case, what happened at the end. So many things are still unclear. She has a right to know, doesn't she?

Perhaps it will still be on the TV.

Abigail has a visitor.

That's all the nurse told her; that she's to wait in her room and behave until they arrive. That they want to talk about her *future*. It's probably some social worker. It hurts to think about too much, but she's an orphan now. She has no-one but herself. There's probably money locked up in the house – she could sell it; that might last a while – and whatever insurance her parents had, the cash in the bank... Practicalities she's been forcing herself to consider, because it's better than just sitting here and letting life and the world go past, like some useless broken toy.

The visitor is not, it turns out, a social worker.

She is a creature of shimmering beauty, incomprehensible, feathered, many-limbed. She is a God and she is Royal (or as Abigail is later told, close enough as makes no difference). Abigail's breath catches in her throat; she bows as she's been taught, scrambling out of the bed and lowering herself in an attitude of worship. She doesn't want to offend. She's never met one of their Rulers in the flesh before.

"I'm very flattered, but there's no need to do that around me," the deity says, and deposits bags at her feet. Abigail looks at them in confusion. They seem far too prosaic and ordinary to even exist in this scenario. She straightens, and risks a glance up through her eyelashes.

"I go by Alana Bloom," the Royal says. She is smiling, and she is very pretty, or at least Abigail thinks she is. It might not mean anything in eldritch terms.

"Sorry," she says, her voice very quiet. "They only said someone was coming to visit me, they didn't say who."

"Sit back on the bed there," Alana tells her, reaching past – *through* – her to pat the rumpled sheets. "Let me explain a few things."

Abigail does as she is ordered. It wouldn't occur to her to do otherwise.

"I've been keeping an eye on you for a little while now, on behalf of a friend of mine. Sometimes I work with the FBI – that's how I heard about your case, what happened to you." The God's voice is very calming. It washes over Abigail like a warm shower, making her passive. "You needed a

guardian when you woke up. Someone to make decisions until you're stronger. I was given custody, and there are two others, Hannibal and Will, whose names are awaiting approval. You'll meet them later. For now I thought here might be best. You've been through a very trying experience, and you need time to heal, psychologically. I know that's important for humans."

It's a lot to take in. Hearing that she is here because a God wanted it so makes her feel a little bit better about it, but she is less sure that she really needs any healing. There's nothing wrong with her. She just has to deal with the situation she's been put into, push it into the past and get on with her life. Everyone else, even the Royal – whom she wants to believe, she *does* – seems to think that she's damaged, fragile. But she doesn't feel like that at all.

"What's in the bags?" she asks. It seems like a safe question.

"I brought you some more clothes. At the hospital they mentioned you didn't have many. The sizes should be accurate. There's music too. Whatever's popular these days. It's not so much my area, but I know humans don't deal well with silence."

"Thank you," Abigail says, feeling her cheeks heating. It's very strange and unexpected to have all this attention lavished on her by a Royal. It's very rare they take such an interest in an individual. She's lucky. "You didn't have to."

"I have responsibilities to you now," Alana replies. "And I'll be helping you get better, later on. Psychiatry is an interest of mine. Crime and family trauma."

"I don't *feel* traumatised," Abigail confesses. "So you needn't, really."

"It might not seem that way now, but give it some time to sink in," the God advises. "You haven't been awake all that long."

Coming from Royalty, what else can she do but pay attention? Alana must know what she's talking about. The eldritch kind are blessed with knowledge of many things. If they didn't understand the needs of humans, why would they rule them?

"I have to go now," Alana says. "But I'll be back again soon. Will and Hannibal will come and meet you as well."

"Before you go," Abigail asks, a little surprised at her own boldness, "can you tell me if you recognise this?" She scoops up the mysterious idol and holds it out for inspection. Alana takes it carefully.

"No, I can't say I do," she replies, with what might be a frown (her face is anthropomorphic, but still not that easy to read). "Hold onto it though. It feels important."

"Okay. Thank you for coming to see me."

"It's my pleasure Abigail."

And then, with flutters of feathers, she has walked between the real and is gone.

Will is giving another lecture on the Hobbs case when Hannibal arrives in the darkness of the tunnel that leads into the hall. He notes the psychiatrist's presence, but whatever it is, it isn't

important enough for him to come right out and interrupt. Or perhaps he is interested in what Will is saying. If so, then it might be more than his students feel. This is partially repetition, which he is not normally given to, but he is still having difficulty putting his own feelings into words, spoken or unspoken. This helps.

He finishes off the lecture (quickly after the point Hannibal came in) by discussing the – possibly Godling – copycat whose kill was helpful in coming to a better understanding of Hobbs himself. That likely wasn't the critic's motives in doing it – it had seemed more about offering up commentary on an inferior craftsman – but in all the sadness of it Will can at least find that silver lining. That this woman's death had, in the end, helped to prevent more.

The students file out, and Hannibal comes forward. His coat is draped over one arm; he is as well-dressed as he ever is during their sessions. Will had thought he might only show off, peacock like, in his own places of power, but now he has to re-evaluate. It might have been those first few meetings that were the anomalies. Hannibal not expressing himself fully because he hadn't yet judged the character of those he went to meet.

"Alana suggested to me that you might be free for a field-trip this afternoon," Hannibal says.

"A field-trip where?" Will asks, packing up his slide-case and other odds and ends of academia into his briefcase.

"To visit Abigail."

Will pauses. There's, of course, his initial reaction of happiness, because he wants to see her, talk to her, find out how she's doing and how he can help. It is overshadowed though by the fact that Hannibal will be coming with him. Which means he must have spoken to Alana about becoming one of Abigail's guardians. The thought sends a sudden chill down Will's spine, and he is still not sure why. It shouldn't be so unthinkable. It isn't as though those of eldritch stock can't be parents, can't have those same feelings as humans do, the more so the thinner their connection to their Royal progenitors. Hannibal would surely be very capable as a father and protector. So why does he dislike the idea so much?

It is a question without an answer. Will pushes it down and instead allows himself to focus on his excitement.

"Whose car are we taking?" he asks.

"I have mine with me," Hannibal replies. "I can drop you off here when we return to collect your own."

Will shrugs, hardly bothered either way. In fact, it might be better if he didn't drive. He feels jittery and nervous.

Abigail is currently staying in the Port Haven Psychiatric Facility, just outside Baltimore. The countryside surrounding it is pleasant enough, and undoubtedly meant to be calming to minds that have trouble coping with the pressure of society. Will spends the drive running through scenarios, wondering how Abigail will react to the sight of him, what he should say to put her at ease. Whether she will hate him.

The building is nice, and the staff are professional and polite. One of the nurses leads them up to Abigail's room, leaving them at the end of the corridor. As they approach, Will thinks he can hear

conversation. His eyes narrow. He doesn't remember anyone mentioning another visitor, and his instincts prickles with wariness.

There is someone else there. A Godling, shadow and flame. Her face is a blank, black mask studded with many blinking eyes and the immobile slash of a crimson smile, and her hair is a tumble of softly-burning fire. She is talking about Will when they walk in, about how he managed to catch the Shrike, about how he is suspicious in being one of the few humans in the FBI. It's typical anti-human prejudice, and nothing Will hasn't heard before, so he ignores it. Of more importance is just who this individual is and what she's doing here.

"Fredrika Lounds, isn't it?" Hannibal says, as polite as ever. Will thinks he can detect a slight edge to the words though. "The journalist."

"I'm surprised you recognised me," she replies. "I don't photograph well, and the drawing next to my by-line never seems to do me justice."

"There are not so many eldritch beings of consequence in Baltimore as all that." It ought to be a compliment, but doesn't entirely sound like one.

"And you must be Dr Hannibal, the psychiatrist who has been working with Jack Crawford." Ms Lounds rises from the bed, everything below the waist a mass of inky tentacles, though they do not touch the floor. Gravity is immaterial to her. She's wearing a dark half-cloak over the more human part of her. "And Will Graham. Fancy, we were just talking about you."

Will doesn't address any reply to her.

"I'm Special Agent Will Graham," he says instead, an introduction directed at Abigail. Her skin is pale, and there's a square of bandage taped over the left side of her neck. She'll have a scar.

"By Special Agent he means not really an Agent," Lounds says. "But that's not really surprising is it? They say he's unstable, disloyal. Can get into the heads of Restorationists so well he might as well be one."

Will feels his heart leap uncomfortably in his chest, but doesn't let it show. Is she capable of picking up that kind of physiological change? He wasn't aware there were rumours about him. He wasn't aware he was important enough for there to be rumours.

"I really must insist you leave the room," Hannibal says, behind his shoulder. Lounds hesitates, but it seems she already has whatever she came here for. She shouldn't even be here in the first place, but she clearly has enough pull, from the secrets she knows or from the connections of her bloodline, to have persuaded the staff here that the rules don't apply to her. Or perhaps she entered by less visible means. Will doesn't know her, or her abilities.

"If you want to talk..." Lounds says before she goes, flicking a business card onto the bed. Will scoops it up quickly and conceals it in his jacket's inside pocket. Abigail is watching all this with a wary expression that makes him feel hesitant. Off balance.

"Do you remember us?" he asks.

"I remember you," Abigail replies. "You killed my dad." Will takes a breath in like it's a physical blow. He'd suspected it would be at the forefront of her mind, but he had hoped...

It does make more sense. Hannibal had been positioned behind her head, even if he was the one to save her life. Will had burst in, been in full view the whole time, had shot, had killed, her father and she had seen it all. Of course he would stick in the memory. His mouth feels dry and slightly nauseous. When he swallows it's a heavy motion.

"You've been in bed for days Abigail," Hannibal says. "Why don't we have a walk."

It's a good idea for a distraction, and Abigail agrees readily enough. They stand outside the door to give her a little privacy while she changes, and then make their way slowly down to the ground floor. Abigail is unsure on her feet, still weak from her coma and the wasting of her muscles that entailed.

"There's a greenhouse, out back," she tells them. "Let's go there. I've been there before; it's nice. Calming. And no-one else tends to go there when it isn't sunny."

It must have been attached to the building when it was still a residential home, before it was converted, judging by the size. Will supposes they kept it because green spaces are supposed to be therapeutic. There are a few benches and chairs, half-hidden in semi-tropical foliage.

He feels he ought to say something. He's feeling guilty, more now than ever. The words spill out of his mouth, unexamined. "I'm sorry we couldn't save your mother." I'm sorry I had to shoot your father, is what he really means. "We did everything we could but... she was already gone."

"I know," Abigail replies. "I saw him kill her."

Will is uncomfortable with the depth of his own emotion in this moment. He hadn't anticipated it would be this bad. That he would feel so responsible. They manoeuvre gradually closer to one of the benches, so that Abigail can sit and rest her aching muscles.

"He was loving right up until the second he wasn't. Kept telling me he was sorry, just... hold still. He was going to make it all go away."

Will cannot deny wanting to do the same. Wipe away the pain, the anguish clear in Abigail's voice. But that's why she's here. He can't do anything to help. The powerlessness is unpleasant to have to acknowledge.

"There was plenty wrong with your father Abigail, but there's nothing wrong with you. You say he was loving; I believe it. That's what you brought out in him."

"That's not all I brought out in him," Abigail says, and Will can't deny it. He knows, bone deep, what Hobbs' motivations were. "I should feel more messed-up than I do. That's what everyone's expecting, isn't it? That's who I'm going to be from now on. The Shrike's daughter, the one he killed all those girls for..." Her eyes screw up closed, trapping in emotion and the threat of tears. "I'm never going to get a chance to be normal again."

Will sinks down onto the bench beside her. "There's a difference between being changed by an experience and being broken by it," he says. "Things can't go back to the way they were, but you can still go forward. You don't have to let this define you if you don't want it to."

"I just... I want to go home."

When they leave, not long after, Will makes a silent promise to himself that he'll do what he can to help fulfil Abigail's request. It's not surprising that she wants the chance to feel like a normal girl again, even for a little while. She wouldn't be able to stay, but picking up a few of her belongings would at least give her the chance to make her room here a bit more comfortable, a bit more familiar. He'll suggest the idea to Alana, who has the power to make it happen. He can't think she'll object.

The journalist, Fredrika Lounds, is waiting for them by Hannibal's car, leaning against the hood. Will wonders, beneath dislike, whether she'll leave soot-marks.

"I don't feel that we were properly introduced," she says, extending a hand which he refuses to take. It is quickly dropped. "My name is Freddie Lounds, and I'm a crime journalist working for the Tattler." The blinking eyes on the blank face watch him carefully for a reaction. "I take it you don't follow the newspapers."

"The things that laughably pass for news these days don't interest me," he replies. Why is she still here?

"Then you don't know you're becoming a little infamous," she tells him. Her features don't allow for expressions; she is inscrutable. "Royalty was involved with the Shrike case, and Royalty always sells. You are just... human interest."

"So people have taken to making things up about me. The kind of lies you were spreading to Abigail up there."

"Well, perhaps I could have been a little harsh. If you want to quash these kind of things, you'll have to put out a statement, or the FBI will. You could give me an interview. Set the record straight."

Will laughs. "So that's what this is about. No thank you, Ms Lounds."

"Feel free to get in touch if you change your mind." She wanders off down the driveway. She may have left transport down there, a car or motorbike. Car seems more likely, discounting certain transportation abilities.

"A less than pleasant individual," Hannibal comments.

Will definitely agrees.

Initially Alana is less than keen on allowing Abigail to visit her house in Minnesota. Her line of reasoning is that Abigail is not yet ready, that although she would deny it, she is much more fragile than she thinks, and the experience could bring up emotions and responses that might be damaging to her. That she might end up re-enacting something that happened that day. Hannibal ends up being the one to convince her, countering with his own psychiatric opinion. He suggests that managed correctly, it could be an opportunity to move past the trauma and heal.

Will doesn't have the knowledge base to come down on one side or the other. His only concern is that Abigail herself thought this would be a good thing for her, and he wants to do something to help. So when they do end up going, he's satisfied.

They drive, the four of them sharing the same car. It's a hire, because they need the boot space for whatever Abigail wants to bring back with her. Will would have offered the use of his own, but he knows it smells very strongly of dog and is covered in their hair, and it would be rude to subject anyone else to that for the multiple hours the drive takes.

The house itself, when they get there, has been spray-painted with the accusation 'Cannibals' over the garage and front doors and the wood panelling beneath the windows. Someone local, Will thinks, someone human. It doesn't seem like a good omen. The house itself is still sealed with police tape though, so at least they don't have vandalism to worry about.

There's a brownish stain on the concrete of the porch. Abigail stands next to it for a moment, her hands clasped tight in front of her, biting her lip.

"Is this where my mom died?"

"Yes," Will tells her, knowing honesty is the best option.

"I don't know what I was expecting," she says. "Just... something more. Goodbye mom."

Is this acceptance, moving on? He's not sure.

Inside the house is quiet and tidy. Mounted stag heads hang on the walls, legacy of Hobbs' love of hunting. There are boxes marked with evidence stickers and tape in the kitchen, and another splash of coagulated red on the floor. It's been cleaned, but it looks like it decided to come back. Psychic impressions on the fabric of reality. It usually only happens in the presence of true-bloods. Hannibal, he thinks randomly, then dismisses it. He's a thin-blood, isn't he? Just look at him. It's just a coincidence.

"You do this a lot?" Abigail asks him. "Go places and think about killing."

"That's how I make myself useful."

"So you pretended to be my dad?"

"And people like your dad." It seems a necessary explanation.

"What did it feel like?" Abigail asks. "To be him?"

Will has to struggle. The experience is not easy to describe. It is *felt*, rather than rationalised. He ends up resorting to metaphor, language more colourful than accurate. "Feels like I'm talking to his shadow suspended on dust."

Abigail nods as though this makes perfect sense.

"The attacks on you and your mother were different, desperate," he says, turning the conversation to the events of the last time she was here. It feels more comprehensible, and Hannibal had suggested working through it in a controlled way. The very air here seems still, like someone has just taken a breath and is holding it in, waiting for the right moment to exhale. "Somehow your father knew we were coming."

"The man on the phone," Abigail replies, nodding. Will looks at her in confusion mixed with intrigue. Although it's not likely to be relevant now, another clue might be helpful in the eventual aim of giving closure.

“There was a call just before it happened? Did you hear the voice?” he asks. “Did you recognise it? What did it say?”

“I’d never heard it before. But it was a man. A unique accent. He just asked for my dad; I didn’t think anything of it.”

The copycat. As soon as Will thinks of it he is convinced. That part of the case had never been resolved, but since the main killer is dead, and the Lady’s patronage withdrawn, no-one had cared enough to look into it. Since the victim was human it’s not likely he could persuade Jack to investigate – it’s no longer in their jurisdiction – but perhaps he could mention it to local police?

“Well, that clears up one mystery,” Alana says. “Now, is there anything in particular you wanted to take back with you?”

They go through boxes of belongings in the living room. Abigail listlessly sorts through piles of books, little decorative objects, family photo albums. She feels strangely brittle, and that makes her wonder if there is some truth to what they’ve all been telling her. If there is some damage in the back of her mind, more than just what she expected and has been doing her best to get past on her own. Has she been suppressing something, and will it all come bursting out when the pressure builds up?

“Why did you really bring me home?” she asks, toying with a stiff cardboard lid.

“To help you,” Alana replies. She crouches with another box next to Abigail, and the closeness of Royalty is paralysing. The feathers, the slender body, give off an unexpected heat. It’s nice to feel it, since the house is very cold with the heating having been off for weeks. “We thought if you came home, it would be easier to leave home behind.”

“A clean break,” Will Graham adds. “Finding some closure.”

Abigail is unsure whether she trusts him. He has this intensity that’s off-putting, like he wants to be protective, or possessive. He’s a killer, she knows. She saw his face when he shot her dad. Satisfied. Would he admit to enjoying it, if she asked? It isn’t right for a human to think like that. It wasn’t right for her dad to do what he did either. They’re claiming a prerogative that isn’t theirs, which makes her think about the Elder-kin journalist who came to talk to her.

Of course if there was any proof the man wouldn’t still be out and free, but rumours have to come from *somewhere*. Even the rumours about Abigail herself are true more often than not. Some of the kids from school had sent her letters. Accusations. And what was painted on the front of the house... So no, she’s not comfortable being around Will Graham.

“It is strange, being back here,” she muses aloud. “It looks, feels, so *empty*. Hollow. All the life has gone now.”

She doesn’t think she’ll have too hard a time moving on. Abigail doesn’t know what she was expecting, although she guesses part of the reason she had wanted so badly to come back was the hope that maybe things *wouldn’t* have changed, that there would be something here that would be just the way she left it and she could have the comfort of slipping back into her old life for a little while. That was childishly optimistic. This doesn’t feel anything like her home anymore.

Most of what she does want to take is things from her room upstairs, but there are a couple of small items from the lounge and kitchen that still have some good memories attached. Most of what's been stacked neatly into the evidence boxes is stained with the knowledge of everything terrible that happened. Particularly the newest hunting products; the hide cushions and the set of little bone deer carvings. She is not so sure now, with the benefit of hindsight, that they aren't made from something else.

At one point when she's standing to move boxes around she sees Marissa out of the window. Her friend is hesitating in the driveway next to the hire car, like she knows Abigail is there and wants to come and say hello. Before she can pluck up the courage her mom appears and grabs her by the arm, saying something angry judging by the expression on her face. Marissa leaves with her, probably unwillingly, if she knows Marissa. Abigail feels that particular pang of home-sickness and loneliness that comes from missing people you knew well and liked to hang out with, knowing that's never going to happen again. If they don't believe she had something to do with her father's murders themselves, they're not going to want to associate with someone who has that suspicion hanging over them.

She tries to smother the hurt by returning to what she was doing, but it sits inside her like a lead weight, or a swallowed stone.

They start to assemble a small pile of boxes in the hallway by the front door. Things to be loaded into the trunk of the car. The afternoon is wearing on. The job has been taking more time than Abigail anticipated, but they can always come back tomorrow. Making the decisions is the hardest part.

No-one had bothered to lock the door behind them. This, as Abigail will soon find out, was a mistake.

Alana and Hannibal are upstairs, trying to impose some order on the haphazard packing of Abigail's belongings into evidence by the FBI grunts. Agent Graham is in the garage, for some reason. She doesn't think she's likely to want anything from in there. When she becomes aware that someone is standing behind her, she thinks it's him, come back from his fruitless task. She turns around.

It's someone she doesn't know. Has never seen before. A boy, about her age, tall, thin, with wild hair and an intense expression.

"You were the bait, right?" he says, and it's fierce and pained, and above all *angry*. "That's how it worked? Lure them back to Daddy for dinner?"

"Who are you?" Abigail asks, backing away carefully. He follows her, stalking steps. "What are you doing inside my *house*?"

"How did you trap my sister? Did you chat her up?"

Abigail is afraid, in a way she hasn't been since the last time she was home and trembling in her father's arms as he held a knife to her throat. This boy hates her, and maybe he's right to. She knows what she did, knows she had to do it, but that doesn't change any of it, doesn't make truth less true.

"Did you help your old man cut out my sister's lungs while she was still alive?"

Wait. No, that's not right. That's not what happened. They were always dead quickly. They never suffered. He's got it wrong, and he's going to hurt her for something that she genuinely never did. Abigail thinks suddenly of the hunting knife that once sat on a stand on the bookcase in the lounge, and is now lying in one of the evidence boxes at the top of the discard pile. She could find it easily, if she ran.

He comes closer, and she bolts. He's fast in chasing her, but he doesn't know the house and that gives her a few extra, precious seconds. She tears at the cardboard, and it's open, and the knife is solid in her hands. She turns. Hands grab her shoulders, throw her to the side and against the wall, a big, threatening body is too close.

She thrusts forwards. His mouth falls open. Pain and surprise. More surprise. Her hands jerk downwards on automatic. His eyes roll back and he is falling, and when he hits the floor she can see the ruin she has made of his belly, wet and bloody. Her hands are covered in it.

He's dead. He's dead, and what is she going to do?

Find help, a still-strong little voice inside her head tells her. Alana, or Hannibal. They're eldritch-kind, they have power, they can *do something*. She lets the knife fall to the floor where the patch of gore is starting to spread onto the carpet and moves, half stumbling and trying not to touch anything and smear it with her bloody hands. Upstairs. Yes. Upstairs.

Hannibal sees her first. He turns towards Alana, and calls out.

"The sound we heard was unlikely to be anything to worry about," he says. Abigail is only half-listening to his words, but she remains poised on the step she was at, suddenly too drained to go any further up. "I will go down myself and make sure that nothing is wrong. There is still much to look through in the bedroom."

Alana hesitates, but then agrees. Abigail sees her from behind as she returns along the hallway, wings and limbs flexing in soothing ways. She blinks hooded eyes, finding herself inexplicably calm.

"Abigail," Hannibal says, coming down the stairs towards her. He looks very assured. "Show me what happened."

She leads him to the body as though in a daze. She feels light-headed, not quite all there. Still no sign of Will Graham, which is odd, because surely he would have heard something? Things are starting to smell of blood.

"He was going to kill me," she says, distantly.

"Was he?" Hannibal asks, but in a comforting way. Not like he doesn't believe her. He crouches next to the boy's corpse. The shadows in the room are doing strange things, Abigail becomes aware. Gathering over the doors and windows, shielding everything from the outside world. She looks back to Hannibal, and he looks different. Larger, in some subtle way. Stranger. She goes down to her knees beside him. It seems respectful.

"You've done very well," he tells her. He parts the slashed shirt gently, to better see the wound gaping beneath. The intestines are covered by the soft, delicate omentum, fatty yellow beneath the blood, like butter. "You acted as you had to, but others will not see it that way."

“They’ll think I’m like my dad,” Abigail says, realising it’s true. Whoever this boy is, he’s related to a murder victim, and they won’t see someone who came for revenge, they’ll just see another tragedy that a Hobbs is responsible for.

“That’s right.” He pauses. “I can help you, if you ask me to. I am not all I seem. You have a choice. You can tell them you were defending yourself when you gutted this man, or you can swear yourself to me, and I will protect you.”

She looks at him and he does not look as human as he did before. Light fractures around him, she cannot keep him in sight. Her vision swims. Who is he? What is he?

“Yes,” she whispers. “I’ll swear it, if you tell me what name to pray to.”

He leans over. Whispers something in her ear. She closes her eyes, lets out a sob. She knows she is in the presence of another God.

She repeats the name out loud as best she can, then the oath she has known since she was a child. When she looks again, his true Self has unfolded. It is terrible and glorious, and she knows it. “The idol,” she says. “That’s you.”

“So it is,” he says. His jaws open very wide, and take the body up into his throat. It disappears quickly. Devoured. Shadows lap away at the stain and suck it up little by little until there is no sign that anything happened here at all. “There. All is well.”

“Thank you Lord.” Her throat is tight, struck with awe. He is much more fierce, much more terrible, than Alana is. He is more how she imagined a God to be. He slips, gradually, into his thin-blood-appearing form again.

“Now, I believe we had some things to collect.”

By the time all Abigail’s chosen possessions have been loaded into the car, darkness has fallen. They won’t be driving any of the way back to Baltimore tonight. Anticipating this, hotel rooms have already been booked. Will for one is glad to flop into bed, more emotionally drained than physically. He’d known this was going to be hard, but hadn’t realised quite how much. Being reminded of the case, of all the unpleasantly loving emotions he had felt as Hobbs, of his arrival at that very house and the terrible situation that had turned into... Not to mention the knock-on effect of Abigail’s own shaken responses.

He’s not all that surprised, then, when Abigail shows up in his sleep once he manages to drop off. But of course, it becomes nightmarish quickly.

He is standing behind her; she is cradled in his arms. He has a knife to her throat. A flood of love is welling up inside him and he can’t let her go ever again. If he lets her leave, she will drift away from him, and he will lose her forever. There’s only one way to make sure she stays by his side. Only one way to protect her.

She trembles in the circle of his arms, and he understands, because the outside world is frightening, it’s terrifying. He shushes her, lets her know it will all be alright, all she has to do is hold still and he will make it right, make everything scary go away, make them one, one family, one person. The knife is very sharp.

They are being watched. The part of him that is Will and not Garret Jacob Hobbs recognises the beast, the black and feathered stag, knows enough to be afraid of it. It's a monster and a symbol and it means nothing good. That fear is taken up by the dreaming-killer self and he flinches, and draws the blade across in a single swift movement. The blood comes in a curtain, a fall of red glass. The carpet of autumn leaves swallows it up hungrily like a sacrifice. Abigail becomes limp, falls back against his chest, cooling far faster than would be natural.

The stag moves away in slow motion. The muscles in its limbs are powerful as steel, liquid as mercury. Either something about the scene has displeased it, or it has seen what it came to see and has no reason to stay. With blood soaking into the arm still wrapped around Abigail's chest, Will feels some small stab of relief that at least it is gone. And then the horror of what he has done catches up with him.

He wakes up sweating, and dripping with it.

As he struggles out of constricting sheets and wrestles the wet T-shirt over his head, Will realises that he has been lying to himself. He hasn't managed to deal with the Hobbs case at all, he's just let it fester at the back of his mind and now it has started to make itself known. He won't be able to go on like this for much longer.

He has to bite the bullet. He has to talk to Hannibal.

In Hannibal's office, they face each other from seats set far apart. Will appreciates the distance. He wants no false sense of intimacy meant to lure him into greater trust. He knows exactly how much he trusts this being, and how easy it would be to let himself open up more. He can't. He has to guard himself, because his self is the only thing he really has.

"I want to talk about Garrett Jacob Hobbs," he says, defiant in the bluntness of his statement. Hannibal inclines his head thoughtfully.

"The emotions that accompanied that case have only become stronger over time," he suggests. Will has to admit that's true. Letting things ferment hasn't weakened anything the way he'd hoped.

"I feel too close to him," he confesses. "When I dream, I feel like I *am* him. I tried so hard to know Garret Jacob Hobbs, to *see* him... past the slides and vials and police reports, in the smallest detail of all those printed faces of those sad dead girls..." The words feel drawn out of him, oozing like pus. There's a sickness in this connection, something corrupt that has started corrupting him.

"How did it feel to see Elise Nichols?" Hannibal asks him. "Or the girl in the field?"

"Even then I felt guilty."

"Because you couldn't save them?"

"Because I felt like I was the one doing these things, despite that Cassie Boyle was murdered by the copycat, not Hobbs. It still felt like some part of me was the killer. That's how it always happens, how it always *happened*."

"You refer to your days working Homicide?"

Will nods. "I hate cases like this," he whispers.

"You enjoy empathising with human killers of eldritch victims, but when the victims are human too, it sours in your mouth."

Hannibal is fond of this kind of language, partly metaphorical, always poetic. Will tries to match him when they speak together, because it suits the mood. It makes him feel better, to put things in these terms. Less clinical. Less as though he is being analysed. The reality is hidden.

"Humans aren't meant to kill other humans."

"Yet you killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs."

Will takes a deep breath in. Yes. His emotions in that moment had been at war and the ripples of that turmoil still crash and echo off the walls of his skull. His mind is a sea under a storm.

"Is it harder understanding the thrill these killers feel, having now done it yourself?"

Will looks away. "No," he says finally. "No, I understand it all too well, and it's making me sick. At myself. I was always disgusted at it in the past so..."

"So what has changed? Perhaps merely that you understand why Hobbs needed killing. It is inevitable that there be a man so bad that killing him felt good. His actions angered and disgusted you, as you said."

Will would like very much to deny it, but he is very afraid that Hannibal has cut entirely to the truth. He liked killing Hobbs, liked killing his own kind, as a means of revenge for everything the man had been making him feel. A punishment for crawling inside his own skin. For making him experience the love he felt, so overwhelming that it drove him to murder and cannibalism.

"What would happen if Jack asked you to look at another crime scene like Hobbs'?" Hannibal asks.

"It'd never happen," Will replies sharply. "That's not what we do. It's not our jurisdiction. It was only by chance that we were ever called in on this in the first place."

"Were that chance never to have occurred, neither of us would have ever met Abigail," Hannibal says. "There are some good things that have come from this experience."

Will softens, unable to help himself when he's reminded of her. "Consider the positives, doctor?" he asks, with a little humour.

Hannibal smiles in that same imperfect way. It's the teeth, Will decides. They are jagged in a way that hints at savagery, a carnivore pretending to be omnivorous. "Garrett Jacob Hobbs has touched you, but he is not all that you are," he says, and Will feels like he's being given an echo of his own advice to Abigail. "The mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of you, not the worst of someone else."

It's a comforting thought. Will is inherently distrustful of comforting thoughts. This world hasn't much room for them. But in this case, considering the source, they might be strange enough words from eldritch-kin to be real. He lets himself smile, and a little of the poison drains away.

The next case feels like dropping back into the swing of things. The Hobbs murders were simply an aberration in the long line of Godling dead that Will has been dealing with for a long time now. He knows how to manage when he's confronted by them. By horrors that he is numb to, or which make him feel a warm buzz of pleasure at the pit of his stomach. In this particular instance, it's more the former. Even his hidden Restorationist sympathies don't make him enjoy the death of children.

Mother, Father, two kids, a happy little thin-blood family slaughtered at their own dinner table. It's personal, not ritual. No trappings. Food left untouched to rot and moulder. Blood where it fell, soaked, splashed. The tablecloth is the colour of mud. Not much of the Royal left in this lot.

The only confusion comes in the person of the killers themselves. Even then, as things proceed over the following weeks he and the Science Trio manage to work it out. These missing Godling boys, perhaps the most human-looking of all their families, harbouring whatever resentments, whatever loneliness; hidden outcasts. Happy-looking photographs of young murderers with stuffed God-dolls, a layer of plaster to hide the lies. They have cast out their kin because they perceive themselves as other. Even though Will does not particularly care about these thin-blood lives, it makes him think of his own family, the one he had and the one he's accruing around him, painfully, with confusion. Adhered by shed blood.

He wasn't expecting this case to get under his skin, and it hasn't exactly. But he is uneasy. His nightmares have been hazy and disturbed; their existence plain, their content obscure. In his regular appointment with Hannibal, they discuss parents, and he learns Hannibal is an orphan much as Abigail is, was cared for by an uncle, has been oft a stranger much as Will was.

Little facts. Personal titbits shared. Each time their relationship leans further towards friendship than the professional. It's a slow creep. Will doesn't think he wants to be Hannibal's friend, yet some part of him must, or he would have put a stop to this long ago. Insisted on boundaries. He never has.

The question arises whether this is intentional manipulation. The answer is as much a mystery as the rest of the Godling's thoughts.

After that he deeply wants to see Abigail again, but he has a job to do. And even on top of his work for Jack, he's still a professor, still a teacher, and he doesn't mean to shirk his responsibilities there either. He has a whole year of his curriculum to go through, essays to mark, advice to give, though he doesn't encourage the last, as he's not good at it, and it makes him uncomfortable.

For all that, Will's students are familiar enough with the demands of the FBI to not be too surprised or bothered when Jack comes barrelling in in his usual bullish way to demand his presence at another possible crime scene. Scrying with trace materials taken from the last house has revealed another child and his home. If they're lucky, nothing will have happened yet.

Will knows better than to assume they'll be lucky.

When they arrive, the door is unlocked, and there's no noise from inside. Everything is quiet and still. The house is decorated early for the Solstice, with holly and evergreen over the door, bull's blood painted along the framework, the faint smell of incense, burned down stubs of candles in the windows, and the wooden animal masks that would be worn during the day's celebrations hanging in the hall when they go in.

There's a thick smell of blood and burnt flesh on the air. It sticks in Will's throat and makes him splutter. He notices that even some of the Godlings are put off by it, though mostly not, and certainly not Zzzzeller, whom he knows goes to a temple with a Brazen Bull.

There are corpses in the living room, scattered around the large fireplace, and the drawn-up, charcoal-black form of a young boy. He feels ill. No amount of resentment and hate could make something like this acceptable. For a moment it's almost as if flames are licking at his own skin. He can't imagine the pain. It would be indescribable.

There's not much he can do here. It is almost like before, same motives, same plan, only the outcome changed, and that's something for the techs to divine why. He tells Jack what the Agent already knows, and goes outside for some fresh air.

A botched attempt, and another dead because of it. Two bullets of cold iron fizzling and burning inside the mother's skull. Did they steal the guns? Or is one of the boys old enough to pass, with false identification, as above the age it's permitted for shops to sell to them? The ammunition... well, even watered-down and weak, their blood is not human. Iron is not forbidden them.

The former possibility proves to be the case when Jimmy makes a link – with deft spell-work – on the second bullet, to another murder, their pattern repeating. A third boy, named CJ Lincoln.

At first they think the eldest Godling child is the ringleader and instigator, but then more becomes clear. The presence of a woman, a replacement mother figure, someone searching for love and hearth-warmth. It is too late to return to any of the crime scenes, but the evidence they have and the conclusions they have drawn from it are enough for Will to claw his way inside her head. It's not so difficult. He suspects she might be human.

Married once. Must have been. To a thin-blood, and probably cared for him deeply, wanted to bear his young. Something must have happened though. Will cannot say anything definite from so little, knows only why and how, not details. Perhaps his other kin disliked her and conspired against her. Perhaps he was never in love with her, or fell out of love. Perhaps she was infertile, and had pinned all her hopes and self-worth on children. That is often the case with human males and human females both, because what better protection than to have half of yourself mixed with the Blood?

This woman's dreams were shattered. Will feels her pain like his own. Her desperation. She'll give anything to have what she wanted back, so she deludes herself that by her own will and her actions she can force it into existence. That's why she's been kidnapping these children, for herself. Making them become her own. All her desires, stolen from those who clearly don't deserve them.

Will breathes deeply, and lets the borrowed emotion slip away, like silk slipping off skin. Family. And longing. He knows the latter more intimately. Never entirely comfortable with his father, his mother an unknown, the idealised lives of the proverbial nuclear family were as ephemeral as mist rising off a lake. They made little sense to him, but he wanted that comfort such belonging promised. Later in life he has made good with his dogs and their company, and now he is stepping into new territory. Abigail. In some way, Alana and Hannibal too, in their shared guardianship, albeit that is more formal.

In thinking so strongly about the topic he finds himself making a misstep, buying fly-tying equipment as a gift to Abigail. The implications are unfortunate, he realises that when he stops to think. It seems a natural thing to want to introduce Abigail to his hobbies, teach her how to fish, but

her real father taught her how to hunt and she will only see an echo of Hobbs rather than everything he wants to be for her.

He goes into the usual weekly appointment with Hannibal with the wrapped present still in his bag, his mind all over the place, tripping over himself. He pours it out in nervous, run-on spurts of words, trying to find his centre again. The psychiatrist himself seems largely unaffected by Will's display of emotion, remaining as calm and placid as ever.

He *is* angry with these kids, Will admits to himself, after their time is up and he's had a chance to go home and cool off. Even though these families, these boys, are of the Blood, their situation has still touched him, wormed into the self he keeps safe under the clothing of empathy he dons each time he looks. Not in the way of their last case, not taking on some Godling nature, but just simple human sympathy. He allows himself to become resigned to the situation. His own thoughts on the matter are too close to the surface right now, and he supposes it was inevitable to feel that these children are throwing away something *he* never got to have.

Beverly's deft rune-work turns up their next boy soon enough though, so Will must put aside his feelings to accompany the strike team when they hit the house. Less devout, their Solstice decorations are not yet up. The white building seems to be nestled by a backdrop of autumn leaves, as though consumed by fire. Or Will merely has that element on his mind.

There's no-one immediately to be found inside, but when the FBI group sweeps out to cover the back-yard, it quickly becomes apparent they are just in time. The children surrender speedily enough, prepared only for their mission here, and certainly not for many strange Godlings with guns and body armour surrounding them and ordering them to drop their weapons. One of them runs. Will follows automatically, although it's not his job.

The woman comes out of the little building by the covered pool and takes the boy into her arms. It's no loving gesture though, or at least, that's not all it is. Will regards the threat of her gun warily. He's not armed. Why didn't he leave this to the professionals? Still, he's human, so he hopes hell seem less of a threat.

"Please," he says, "put the gun down."

He already knows that she won't listen, that with this convenient hostage she'll be free to back off and get away at least for a little while, and might easily shoot him into the bargain if it's expedient. He still has to try.

Didn't need to, in the end. Beverly, masterful at everything she puts her mind to, makes the shot from the treeline. It takes the woman in the shoulder of her gun arm so that she drops it, and lets the child – Christopher, that's his name – go. Will breathes a sigh of relief.

Their group of Lost Boys, tiny killers, are all taken into custody. The mother-figure needs medical attention, but she'll live to stand trial. All in all, the outcome is a good one. Will just wishes he could feel a bit better about it. That same anger at the waste of their lives is still souring him on the whole matter.

But it's over. And next week, or next month, there will be a whole new case demanding his attention. He tries to start the process of putting it out of his mind. Let it be relegated to memory, where it belongs.

Chapter 4

Her Royal visitors don't come that often, but that they come at all is a special kind of excitement that Abigail holds deep inside her like something precious. No-one else here in this boring place filled with strangers she can't seem to bond with gets visitors like hers! She feels ever more holy with every passing day. At night before bed she prays to the idol of the God she is sworn to, and sometimes she would swear that He is watching her out of its eyes.

The days are made long by her wish not to be here. She bears them because she's been commanded to. Abigail knows her duty, and maybe there is something a little tender and fragile inside her that needs protection and cosseting until like a broken bone it heals again stronger. But that doesn't mean she wants to discuss what happened to her with any of the other girls. The concept of group therapy seems laughable to her.

It helps some of the others here, she can see that, although she's less sure 'help' is really the right word. But none of them had their symptoms bestowed upon them by a God. They've come here because other things in their lives have damaged them, or because of something in their biology. They are not, Abigail finds, particularly holy. So she can be open-minded. It still seems a little ungrateful, but if they want to go back to the way they were, the way *ordinary* people are, that's their business.

Alana's visits are sometimes awkward because the Royal tells her she should be trying harder, talking in group, healing. She wouldn't refuse an order, but Alana never orders, she just encourages, and looks at her sympathetically which makes her feel strange. It isn't the curious, aloof interest of Hannibal, watching as she'd sworn the oath. It's too personal for a God.

Still, Abigail does her best to try and please her, but the words never seem to come very easily, staring out at five or six faces with varying levels of judgement, or blankness, or some stab at caring. She was always introverted, with Melissa one of her only close friends which had been as she liked it, but this just makes her want to go to her room, curl up under the blankets and never come out again.

Abigail is relieved, then, when she hears that Hannibal himself is here to see her. She invites him up to her room so they can talk freely, although she is sure that wherever they were, if he really didn't want them to be overheard they wouldn't be. She has never seen a disguise as good as his. She doesn't know why he needs a disguise, but perhaps he just finds it pleasing, and that's reason enough for a God.

"How are you Abigail?" he asks her.

"Good," she replies, sitting up very straight and proper on the bed. "I've been having strange dreams, compared to my usual, but I don't think it's anything for me to worry about."

"Tell me about them."

"I keep seeing Nick Boyle's body, just lying there on the ground, but it follows me around wherever I go. Even when there are other nightmares, like when there are creatures in the forest chasing me, he's still there wherever I turn. It isn't even scary or anything, it's just a bit off-putting. I don't understand why it's happening."

“Spilling his blood changed you,” her God tells her. “It’s an inevitable consequence, and your mind is still trying to fit that change into your own self-image.”

“Sometimes I have to kill him again,” Abigail confesses. “It’s not doing it... I just remember how scary it was to have him there, in my home, threatening me. That’s how I know I did the right thing, even if you hadn’t been there to tell me it was right.”

Hannibal smiles. “I am glad you realise that. And how are you getting along here?”

Abigail sighs. “Urg, it’s so dull! I talk in group about things that don’t even matter, because I don’t want to see their judgey faces. I’m trying, for Alana, but I don’t think it’s working.”

“Then how would you like a little field trip? I’ve made arrangements for you to have dinner at my house.”

If Abigail could sit more to attention, she would. That would be... it would be such an honour! “Yes!” she says. “Yes, I would love that!”

“You would have to return here before midnight,” Hannibal cautions, though his expression is still pleased. “But in the meantime, we can have some fun.”

Abigail sits in the opulence of the God’s kitchen, watching a glass teapot full of some kind of dried mushrooms brew, little twists of brown twirling with the movement of hot water. Colour changes slowly.

“Psilocybin,” Hannibal says, gesturing with the knife he’s using to peel potatoes. “Hallucinatory mushrooms.”

“Dreams and visions, the Gods’ gifts to favoured followers,” Abigail recites. She’s excited. She’s taken hallucinogens before of course, in temple when her class graduated from the children’s school to the main services. A rite of passage. Some of the things she saw were strange or frightening, others oddly comforting, and some seemed like they ought not have existed at all, but it is still a good memory. She’s never had them in the presence of a God before though. What might she see?

Hannibal smiles again. He seems contented here, in his Fastness. A little more relaxed, less the stiff and proper aspect he wears in the outside world. Abigail lets herself pretend it’s all for her. “Have you considered what you are going to do once you leave the hospital?” he asks her.

“I was applying to college before all this,” she explains, looking away. It’s an uncomfortable subject. “But my dad killed girls at all the schools I applied to. I’m going to have to go somewhere further away, where they haven’t heard of me, if I want to at all. And I do! I do want to!”

A thought occurs to her.

“I mean, if that’s what you wish for me, of course,” she says, feeling guilty. She has obligations now. She’ll take her oath seriously.

“I would have my future Priestess be educated, if that pleased her,” Hannibal replies.

Abigail looks up at him, flushing with pleasure. He'd said it before, 'Priestess', but she hadn't really taken it in, half in shock from the suddenness of killing Nick Boyle. She'd half thought she imagined it, but no, it's real. Her! A Priestess! She feels tingly and warm all over.

"I thought about going into the FBI, after I saw what Will does," she confesses. "But I don't know if I'm good enough. I'm only human."

"I would certainly feel satisfied if you were in the FBI, protecting my interests. I am confident that with guidance you are capable of proving your worth to them."

"And to you, I hope," she says, breathless.

"I have no doubt of that."

Abigail can tell from the colour that the tea is nearly ready. She fidgets, anxious to try it. The smell rising in the steam is rich and gamey, almost animal. Hannibal notices where her attention is. Setting down the knife and wiping his hands on the apron tied around his waist, he goes over to the counter and lifts the lid of the pot, inhaling delicately.

"Purchased from a very select supplier," he says. "A Mr Eldon Stammets. He is well known in Baltimore as the best farmer of organic mushrooms in the state."

"I'm honoured."

He pours two cups of the dark liquid and slides one towards her, picking the other up himself.

"Does it have any effect on you?" Abigail asks, curious.

"Not as such," Hannibal replies. "But I find the taste pleasant." He raises his cup, and they touch rims with a polite little 'ching' of china on china. Abigail smiles, and raises it to her lips, inhaling the scent. It's a little too hot to drink yet.

The temperature doesn't seem to bother Hannibal, who sips his with clear enjoyment. He returns to his chopping board and ingredients. Butter is melting in a frying pan on the stove. When he puts in sausages, hitting hot metal with a sizzle, their delicious smell joins the mixture of others wafting around the kitchen.

Abigail watches him continue to cook as her tea cools, drinking careful small amounts so as not to burn her tongue. As time passes, she becomes aware of a soft haze descending over her, not quite like the one that comes from alcohol. The world seems strange. It is no longer as solid as it ought to be. Her vision wavers; objects slide in and out of focus, or change their shape, or have faint colours ripple across their surfaces. She tilts her head, seeing how that affects what she is seeing.

"What do you see?" Hannibal asks her.

She turns to look at him, and he is revealed in all his Royal glory. Massive, and dark, and powerful. Many-limbed, crowned with antlers. Aflame. She found it hard to look at him before, for he was terrible to gaze upon, and her heart and mind had quailed. It is easier now, with the cushion of the drug flowing through her veins.

"I see You," she replies.

"Very good Abigail. I have another something for you. Come."

Shadows are pressing in close all around. She stands, and walks, and feels light as air and then heavy, detached from her own body and then imprisoned by its meat and bone walls. Hannibal's house is dark and wild around her. The navy wallpaper stretches up, and then she is walking through trees, a forest. Night, and the sky above with unfamiliar stars barely glimpsed through the leaves.

They are descending. Muffled noise comes from up ahead, but she can't make out what it is. They come out into a clearing, and still she cannot see what they are heading towards because the bulk of the God is too great; he blocks out all in their path. There is something though, very black even against the heavens above. The black that seems to swallow all light. Void. A pillar of void.

"Your first test and sacrifice," Hannibal says softly. His voice comes as though he's whispering into her ear, making her jump. He moves to the side, inscribing a circle. There is a pillar, an obelisk, and at its base an altar. On the altar, a human figure, impaled on broken pieces of what looks like antler, still faintly struggling.

"So it *was* you. The copycat." Abigail isn't sure why that of all things is first to spring to mind. But then, she already knows, deep down, what the man is doing there, and why *she* is here as well.

Hannibal does not answer. There's no need to. He rises, straightening up and out. His presence becomes all the more vast. Ink-dark tentacles writhe over the barren ground until she and the sacrifice are encircled by them. Others reach out to her, and offer her something concealed in the shadows they bring with them.

Abigail does not let herself hesitate. She reaches out, into the shifting mass, and takes it.

It's an obsidian dagger, crudely made, clearly very ancient. Old blood has clotted to its surface in layer after layer, but the edges have been cleaned, and are very sharp. It fits in her hand as though made for it.

Abigail knows what she has to do. A certain clarity has returned to her mind, shocked into it by the importance of this moment and what follows. She walks slowly over to the altar, knife hovering in the air. If this were any other situation, what she is about to do would be a crime. But this is holy. It is for a God. If she has doubts, it's only that she is worthy of the task.

She cuts his throat quickly and calmly, with as much mercy as she can, knowing she echoes her father's attempts at kindness that still didn't make up for the presumption of his acts. The acts she helped him with. She hopes this goes some way towards making up for that.

The sacrifice's blood spurts quickly into the channels cut for it. It flows and flows and slackens as his heart gives out and his body stills. The life-gore trickles to the column of Void and is devoured by it. The very world seems to shudder around her, the ground trembling beneath her feet.

"Well done," Hannibal tells her, like the tolling of a bell. "Well done, my little Priestess."

Will's dreams, always an accurate barometer of his general mental health and stability, have been calmer lately, which is why he is so surprised to wake up in the middle of a road several miles away from his house, staring into the lights of a local police car. He was being followed by something, he remembers that much in a hazy fashion, but it wasn't a nightmare where he's forced to run from something that will inevitably catch him. He wasn't running. Just walking.

Winston is behind him, making his presence known by nosing at his hand, but that is not who was in the dream.

The police drive him home. They're probably thankful it was something as benign as it was, considering the usual kind of crimes they have to deal with these days. It's really only by chance that the little helpful things get dealt with.

He tries to go back to bed, but he can't sleep, too afraid he'll just get right back up and start wandering again. The minutes tick past slowly on the clock. Will tosses and turns and thinks about what it might mean that he has just suddenly started sleep-walking out of the blue like this. Eventually he can't bear it anymore, and gives the whole thing up as a bad job. He gets up, showers, gets dressed and stares morosely at the mouldy bread in his cupboard before deciding to get breakfast later, on the way to work. It's about half past four in the morning.

He isn't thinking about the time when he goes to see Hannibal. It just seems... natural. He's confessed to him where he would never have done with anyone else, so perhaps it's not so strange that the psychiatrist would be the best person to analyse this latest upset, but as poorly socialised as Will is, he usually knows better than to come calling at someone's house so early. Even if it's a friend, and Hannibal is not supposed to be a friend. Too late to pretend their relationship remains strictly professional though.

Hannibal is surprisingly gracious about being woken up. He answers the door in the poshest set of sleep-wear that Will has ever seen, with an elegant bath robe over the top. His hair is mussed from its usual gelled back perfection. He seems sharp though, without the usual haze of just-broken sleep. Must be a morning person.

"Will," Hannibal greets him. "I assume this must be important to come so early. Please, come in."

"I'm sorry if I woke you up," Will says, keeping his jacket on while he enters, not intending to stay for long. It was a mistake coming here, but he wasn't thinking. "I probably shouldn't have come."

"Let's discuss this over coffee."

The coffee maker is almost architectural, but the stuff that comes out of it is certainly delicious. Will didn't get much sleep last night, but doesn't *want* to sleep, leading to a strange, tense tiredness that is yet not actually sleepy. He welcomes the caffeine.

"I'm sorry it's so early," Will says, still feeling the need to apologise.

"Never apologise for coming to me," Hannibal replies, in a friendly fashion. "Office hours are for patients; my kitchen is always open to friends."

Will chuckles nervously. Boundaries. He should be insisting on those, but he can never force the words out of his mouth. His throat closes around them. He takes another large swig of his coffee.

"This sleepwalking is new for you, yes? Have you thought about what might be causing it?"

"I don't know," Will says, wanting to pace. But he doesn't want to seem even more... rowdy... than he has already. "I thought it might be physical. Something wrong with my brain."

"We both know the psychological is more likely. Your recent experiences have put pressure on your self-actualization. It may be pushing back."

“You think I can’t handle what I’ve done.”

“I think you are unwilling to accept what you are capable of. You see acting – as you perceive – out of character as a loss of control.”

“So if my body is walking around without my permission, you’d say that’s a loss of control.”
Which makes... too much sense.

“Wouldn’t you?” Hannibal confirms.

Things keep tracking back round to Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Will is starting to half-wish he’d never heard the name.

“Sleepwalkers experience a difficulty with aggression. Your difficulty with aggression is that you fear yourself when it is pointed at the wrong target – wrong in your eyes.”

“So you think I should just accept that I’m capable of killing a person and what? Be *happy* about that?”

“If that is what it takes to restore your psychological well-being, then yes.”

Not the answer he wanted to hear, but then was he ever really expecting an easy answer? Will has no come-back that will suit. He can’t really expect one of the Blood to understand his qualms. Even as hard as Hannibal might *try* to understand them, and do a good job from an academic point of view, he’ll never be troubled by something like Will’s empathy. He’ll never fully *understand*.

Will doesn’t know how he can take Hannibal’s advice and remain who he is.

Jack calls him up nearly as early the next morning, but despite that Will is awake to answer him. The incident of the night before is preying on his mind, activating those familiar neural pathways that map out his fear, anxiety, something a little too close to panic. The panic is just that kind of feeling he gets whenever he’s trapped in a situation where the outcome is entirely out of his control, which means Hannibal was almost certainly right about the root cause.

Will’s thoughts are not working at exactly top speed even though he’s used to periods of disturbed or meagre sleep whenever his nightmares are particularly bad. He drinks several cups of coffee and pops a few caffeine pills on the drive up to New Jersey under Jack’s watchful and disapproving eye, trying to get his head in the game.

The scene itself is at a small motel in Trenton, somewhere between the city proper and suburbia. An unpleasant pall hangs over the place; an aura of seedy disrepute even though the building itself is not overly shabby. Will suspects it has a bad local reputation.

Jack gives him basic details about their victims as they head in, pulling on blue latex gloves to avoid contaminating anything. Skin to surface contact is enough to pass along small psychic impressions, stronger in correlation to the nature of those who left them. It’s an important part of crime-scene analysis, and even the slightest brush-up from someone else can be enough to disrupt that delicate energy.

“Mutilated, altered and displayed,” Jack explains with obvious distaste. “At first I thought it might be the Chesapeake Ripper, but nothing was taken. If it’s a sacrifice, the un-sub’s not stealing power that way.”

The Ripper is a case Will is familiar with. Just before his time, but he’d followed it in the papers. A trio of Godlings killed in imaginative ways, made ritual sacrifices, but never the same way twice. Organs were taken, and probably devoured. Typical eldritch predatory behaviour, but by someone without the legal right to it. The variety amongst victims and displays had indicated some being of uncommon intelligence and cruelty.

“Where’s your head?” Jack asks him. His distraction today couldn’t have passed unnoticed.

“On my pillow,” Will replies, rubbing his eyes. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“I’ve got just the thing to wake you up.”

As inured as he is to horrifying sights, Will has to admit this is bad even for him. The thin-blood couple are a mess of torn skin, exposed bone and contorted muscle, stretched by yet unknown magics to slender things twice their normal size without regard to the effect it would have on their bodies. Useless wings have been moulded from their shoulder-blades, their hides bursting outwards from the arcane pressure, bone shattered into splinters that were coaxed to grow with un-natural hideousness. Taut wires of tendons, ligaments, and corded muscle make a web that might in theory persuade the futile limbs to weakly move, but the tattered things would never have served for flight.

Even the faces have been altered. It’s easy enough to tell the changes from their original features, for those are fixed in agony, whilst the additions are unpleasantly placid. Elongated skulls, new sprouted eyes, blood rolling down over split skin and the expanse where a mouth should have been...

“Angels,” Beverly notes, from where she’s taking samples by the cheap table set under the window.

“What are they?” Zzzzeller asks.

“They were a part of the mythology of the Roman God,” she explains. “Winged messengers, who were fearful to look upon.”

“So our murderer is a professor of ancient history?”

“Not necessarily,” Will butts in. “Some places they teach basic details like that in high school history. Not in any depth, and mostly for the purpose of showing how wrong those old priests were, but I learned about them when I was a kid. The pictures in the textbooks never looked anything like this though.”

“I took a course at Uni because I was interested,” Beverly says. “We read their old religious texts. One of their prophets described them a bit more like this. Lots of eyes, scary incomprehensible fuckers. Maybe he was getting a touch of the real thing through the Void, who knows?”

“Zzzzeller’s point still stands then,” Jack says, lurking at the back of the room to not get in anyone’s way. “This guy knows something about the religion of humans before the Coming of the Great Old Ones.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean he’ll be that easy to find,” Will points out. “It’s not like books about that time in history are banned – no-one takes them seriously. Plus, we know he has to be of the Blood, so if he’s been studying on his own initiative, he won’t have had to worry that someone will take him for a Restorationist.

“And if he’s been reading the same books as you Beverly, then I suspect he might have come to some of the same conclusions. These creatures are posed, crouched over the bed. He slept here last night, and he made angels to watch over him as he did. I don’t know whether it’s a perversion, if he’s mocking them after he fed off them, or some strange sense of humour.”

“I know you might not get anything,” Jack tells him. “But try and get into his head for us anyway.”

Will sighs. “I’ll give it a shot. But I’m going to need a large piece of plastic sheeting for the bed.”

Head settling back onto soft pillow. Breathe in, then out, movement of chest and ribs and abdomen out then in. Sunlight filtering through window to left. Awareness, suddenly, of discomfort in swath above shuttered eyes, fluttering feeling like cramp. Then gone, and everything else comes into focus.

So many colours! Delicacy of shades warping into one another or set side by side in elegant contrasts, whole world beautiful. Harmony. Human realm place of lightness unseen before in Void-Sea time, a wonder to be preserved in natural occurrence. Scurrying mortal lives, so many animal shapes, all part of greater whole, clockwork in massive machine. Work with their dimension to make grand piece of art. Could live here forever, watching it all, ever changing, ever perfect.

But some elements disharmonise. Breedings of kin and creatures native, making their own harmony in oil-and-water of two planes meeting in bodies made concrete, have potentials mortals do not. Act outside of here-place rules, shatter beauty and wonder. Betray their potential. Must be shown the error of their ways.

Old tales of lesser god-creatures recalled from long-since readings. Supposed messengers of gladsome tidings, shall be created for carrying warnings to other transgressors. Pitiful souls and pitiful power not fit to be kept, will go to better use. New shapes teach inharmonious their place. Will remain as part of pattern. Not deviate again.

Will wakes as though from one of his nightmares, with a full body jerk and a gasp. His eyes meet an empty room, then the dead gaze of the sculptured horrors bowed over him, and he lets out a high whine of terror without even being aware of it and bolts from the bed, rolling to the floor and scrabbling away. His head is still full of echoes of alien thoughts, pain splitting his skull like an ice-pick driven through his forehead, trying to divide one hemisphere from the other.

Oh Elder Gods, what did he just see? What just happened?

With each blink of his eyes the world seems to shift back into that elegant configuration of physics and geometry once again, deterministic, choreographed, utterly incomprehensible to the limitations of his only too human mind. Each moment drives the stab of pain further into him. His limbs spasm, and he curls as best he can into a ball, trying to cover his head and block out the light in some vain attempt to hide from what has opened up inside his brain.

He only becomes aware that he has been screaming when Jack, Beverly and the others burst back into the room, surrounding him in a flurry of action and shouted words that don't make it past a ringing slowly growing in his ears. In flashes, he perceives them as vectors, pasts and futures spooling out on either side of them, an intricate fractal network. Beverly crouches next to him, and rests a cool palm carefully on the exposed back of his neck.

Harsh buzz of words. Jack nodding. Then, at last, someone else in there with him to spread the load, and slipping into the darkness of blessed relief.

Something is beeping. It's familiar, in that seen on television way that doesn't require any actual real-life experience. Will shifts slightly, just to test that he can. He's lying on something soft, with the covers pulled up to his chest, and he's a little cold. Rolling his head to the side takes a lot of effort, but when he does he can make out hospital equipment, bulky in darkness. Curtains drawn. He's in a side room.

His throat is very dry. He attempts wetting his lips with a parched tongue, but he might as well not have bothered. There's a glass of water on the side-board, but that is essentially a mile away with how weak he is. At least his head is his own. Thick, like he's been stuffed full of cotton, but familiar, and human, and sane.

A little more moving about reveals a 'Call Nurse' button within reach, and pressing it a couple of times eventually summons a business like figure of indeterminate gender who props him up and lets him take a few heavenly sips from the glass before fetching him a straw for the rest. He's been out of it for days, it transpires. Details of exactly what was wrong with him will have to wait for a doctor. He's had visitors from the FBI, but visiting hours are long over, and won't tick round again until tomorrow afternoon, but they have been called to inform them that he has woken up.

Will finds himself oddly placid about all this. He suspects he has been drugged. There is a faint edge of panic lurking around the edges, waiting to make itself known, but for now he is too hazy to process much of anything. He should be terrified of the eldritch mind he'd stumbled into, of what it means that he was capable of seeing that much, even if it nearly broke him, of what lingering damage it might have caused. He's not looking forward to the medication wearing off, and having to feel all that.

Once the water is finished, he slides back down into his nest of pillows, and goes back to sleep.

Ward round early the next morning, and one of the juniors with a goatish beard, tail, and hooves sticking out from the hems of his dress pants stays behind in the room after a bunch of medical jargon has been spouted, which Will is too drained to parse, in order to explain things to him.

"How much do you remember of what happened to you?" the doctor asks him, perching delicately on the end of the bed.

"I was doing just what I normally do; my job," Will replies, rubbing sleep from the corners of his eyes, gathering his thoughts into a place where he can actually answer questions. "I can empathise with any human, but not usually with the Blood. This... I remember getting into his head. Then I couldn't get out again. It was too alien. I couldn't process it."

"You were lucky that a psychic got to you as soon as they did. Things could have gone very badly for you. We've had several doctors specialising in connecting with human minds look you over,

and the good news is that there has been no permanent damage.”

“And the bad news?” Now the fear is coming. Trickling in like ice-melt, silent and very cold.

“Have you ever been tested for psychic abilities Mr Graham?”

“Yes. But the results were never more than low level. It should be in my notes shouldn’t it?” His head doesn’t have the same degree of chemical thickness as the day before, but his thoughts remain slow, dragging. Will is having to concentrate quite hard just to take in what’s being said.

“The reasons as to how this has happened aren’t clear,” the goatish junior says apologetically, “but what *is* clear is that the natural psychic barriers of your mind have been eradicated entirely. You are psychically wide open. Whatever the exact mechanism of your abilities before, you will be able to connect with anything now that has a mind.”

Will has to take a moment. Allow this to sink in. At what this means. For his work with Jack, for his own mental health... Looking at crime scenes just became a massive risk, which is not even getting into how difficult daily life could become if he no longer has any walls and defences to hide behind. It would only take one slip, one moment where he looks too hard and long at a Godling stranger and slips into their mind and then he really could damage himself. Permanently.

“Can you... do anything?” he asks, trying not to let the strain slip into his voice.

“There’s training you could complete,” the doctor replies. “Gain some measure of control. But we can’t close you off again. These things don’t work that way I’m afraid.”

Will’s head is spinning. His bedrock has dissolved underneath his feet, revealing itself as nothing but impermanent sand. He supposes, in a far off way, that it is no death sentence, that it’s something he could learn to live with in time, but this will change so many things about his life and how he lives it that he can’t fit the whole thing into his head in one piece. It’s too large, requiring constant turning like a complicated puzzle that he can’t quite seem to figure out.

“Has someone told Jack about this? I mean Agent Crawford, my boss?”

“Don’t worry too much about it right now,” the junior says, obviously noting his distress. “You’ve suffered a very trying experience, and you need a lot of rest before you’re ready to start thinking about going home, much less back to work.”

Easier said than done, but Will tries to focus on anything else as the Godling leaves him, having plenty of other things to attend to. He can’t think about the case, about what progress the rest of the team might have made on catching their unlicensed killer, because that quickly loops back round to the horror of incomprehension that was the way that creature saw reality. He can’t think about anything to do with the FBI at all, but as whenever you’re told not to think about something, he can think of nothing but.

This is perhaps the low point of his life thus far. Betrayed by his own mind and body, stuck in a hospital bed having come close to losing his sanity, the part of himself he cherishes the most, and a delectable snack to the next Royal or near Royal who happens to scent his tender psyche from miles off, like a shark scenting miniscule droplets of shed blood.

A nurse brings him breakfast, and more medication to be taken right afterwards, which is frankly a relief. The little white pills allow him to drift away again in that cotton-haze, and forget all future

uncertainties. Will lets himself fall gradually asleep, hoping that his dreams might be as medicated as his waking.

“This is a very interesting physiological reaction,” somebody is saying at his bedside. Will blinks, trying to move tired eyes and focus in on the out-of-focus form. The room is very dark, and he can’t make anything out except vague shapes, which is strange because he doesn’t think he can have been asleep all that long. “I confess, I did not anticipate such an acceleration in the process.”

The voice though. He knows that voice. “Hannibal?”

“Hush now Will.” A cool hand is stroking across his brow, a thumb circling the place in his forehead where – he now realises – the pangs of pain from his mind’s eye opening had been emanating. “You still sleep. You need not awaken in this realm, not yet. I shall take care of this little problem whilst you slumber.”

“No,” Will says, rising into greater consciousness and starting to struggle with the unwieldy tangle of his covers. “What are you talking about?” He still can’t see a thing. Everything is inky. A familiar foreboding starts to open itself up inside his chest, like maggots eating their way out of rotting flesh. Suddenly he is less sure he *wants* to see, but a sick curiosity drives him on.

“You will no more remember this than our last true meeting,” Hannibal tells him gently, pressing him back down. There are too many hands touching him. They do not all feel human-shaped. “I can smell the fever that is brewing inside you. Your body reflects the duality of your mind, the war you wage against yourself. It will devour you, in time.”

Something sharp and pointed sliding down his throat, following the contours of his larynx, down to the hollow where his collarbones meet his sternum. Will cannot move for the terror that has now gripped him, coming up strongly like a flood. His skin contracts, prickling, aflame.

“It burns you; it ripped you open faster than I had intended. It will not do. You are mine now, and I shall have no madness in you that I did not place there myself.”

“Please...” Will does not know what he is begging for, only that he is helpless and laid utterly open before Hannibal’s mercy. Powerful waves of déjà-vu wash over him, the sense of something horrid laughing inside his head, behind a dark, tall wall that he claws at with blunt, useless fingernails to no avail. This or something like this has happened before, and he knows it, should remember it, but it has been locked far out of his power to reach.

“When this is over you will be stronger, my dear Will,” Hannibal tells him. Needle-tips of steel-cold prickle around the crown of his head like thorns. The old image from history textbooks comes to him in one of those peculiar flashes of association memory has; the avatar of the Roman God’s son, raised up in proper human sacrifice, albeit to the wrong deity. “You shall come through the cleansing pain of this and future trials into full awareness of all you are and might yet be.”

Will tenses for it, but when the agony comes, he could never have been prepared. Claws sink deep into his skull, passing through splintering bone, down into the wet, soft, fleshy organ that is him. He should be dead, should have died instantly, but Hannibal doesn’t let him. Doesn’t even allow him to sink into the calm bliss of unconsciousness. Forces him to remain paralysed in the contorted bindings of excruciating pain.

How long it takes he can't tell. There are no nerves in the brain, but plenty in the meninges that surround it, sparking with every little twisting movement those claws make, carrying out their arcane alterations. Finally they are withdrawn, and Will's eyes flicker open, catching a mere glimpse of Hannibal's monstrous true self, licks of fire dancing around its fingers slick with blood, before it moves away and back into shadows beyond his focus.

He licks dry lips, notes his throat is harsh from screaming he hadn't been able to hear.

"Better," Hannibal says. "Control becomes possible."

"What..." Will manages. "What did you do to me?"

"Negotiated armistice," Hannibal replies, tapping him lightly on the brow before Will can jerk his head away. "But I must leave something behind to keep the peace, until this is through."

He doesn't particularly like the sound of that. He is weak as a newborn kitten though, and knows better than to think even fresh and strong he would be able to do anything. That doesn't mean he is capable of lying down – mentally at least – and accepting whatever will happen. He won't pass into weary, hopeless resignation. No. Never.

Hannibal could have broken him. He was inside his head, more than just physically, had to be. The Royal could have twisted him, made him into a willing servant, sucked out his independence and free will, left him lesser. The creature chose not to. Whatever it wants Will for, it wants his personality intact.

The knowledge is little comfort. It doesn't change anything, or give Will any power.

"Yes, here would be best." Hannibal's voice sinks into his awareness again, and Will looks down to see an inky mass of *something* suspended just above his chest. He jumps in horrified surprise, or would have, had he energy for more than the slightest shiver. He cannot move or run as the thing is lowered closer and closer, until at last it passes *through* the thin hospital gown, a sudden slick pressure against his skin, and then through that too. The sensation of the eldritch monstrosity occupying the same space as his own body is... indescribable. Terrible and terrifying. He pants, and feels as though tiny tentacles are brushing up against his lungs, even though he knows the nerves there are not fine enough to differentiate that.

"Oh Gods," he sobs, trying to burrow away, deeper into the mattress.

"No Gods but me," Hannibal tells him, a hiss of warning. Of jealousy perhaps. The dark *thing* is almost all the way in. Brief moments before it vanishes inside, tiny sets of eyes open up to meet his own, blinking wetly. Will screams.

He is still screaming when he thrashes his way out of his bed onto the cold hospital floor, his hands scrabbling at his chest.

Another nightmare, although the details of it are quickly fading. Will pants, gradually slowing his breathing back down to normal, noting the sweat sticking his gown unpleasantly to his skin. Gods, well, was that really such a surprise, after what he had seen in that angel-maker's head? It had nearly killed him, so he feels justified that it has affected him in his dreams as well. He just hopes it isn't something that's here to stay, that he'll just gradually work the experience out of his system through the terrors of his nights, processing something too alien for his conscious mind. That is likely why he already can't remember it.

As his heart rate and respiration come back to normal, Will gradually gets his feet under him again. Feeling the need for cold water against his skin, he goes through to the en-suite bathroom to freshen up. He has to admit, studying himself in the mirror, that he looks like hell. His hair is tousled in all directions and his eyes are sunken into dark pits. His skin is pale and clammy and unpleasant.

Some part of him is surprised by his reflection. Expecting... something else. Will blinks, and for a moment his face is swathed in drying blood, but the sight vanishes with the swiftness of any other late-night hallucination. Sighing deeply, he bends to the sink to wash the salt-stick of sweat from his skin.



Jack Crawford comes to see him the next day. Will is feeling much better, his head clear, his thoughts pure, his strength starting to return. Whatever part of the experience he had exorcised the night before, it had clearly helped. He is able to give Jack his full attention.

He suspects Jack would rather not have that attention on him. There is a delicacy, hesitancy, in the way he moves and speaks. Will has no desire to look too deeply at the reasons behind that, mostly for fear of turning the gaze of his opened mind on him and perceiving more than he ever wanted or intended. That doesn't mean he can't make a few logical deductions. Jack is feeling responsible for what happened. Guilty.

Worse, the permanent damage that had almost been done to Will is making Jack view him in a different way, a way that Will doesn't much like. He had perceived at the very beginning of their acquaintance that Agent Crawford had treated him as though he were delicate, easily damaged by the work he was doing for the FBI. It hadn't been entirely unexpected – Will had imagined there would be some sort of anti-human prejudice or other, and overall, this particular manifestation from

his boss was one of the least harmful ones. As the months passed and he managed to avoid collapsing into a psychologically fractured heap, Jack had come to accept that he was capable of dealing what his empathy showed him. And now this has happened.

“How are you feeling Will?” Jack asks him.

“Surprisingly well, actually,” he replies. He doesn’t know how much the doctors told Jack. Doctor-patient confidentiality can be rather malleable when the patient is human, and the one asking isn’t. Better to give him the impression the whole thing was much less of a big deal than it seemed.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Jack says. “Beverly told me some of what she saw when she stabilised your mind.”

Damn it. Will feels a little stab of betrayal. He would have thought Beverly knew him better than that, would know he wouldn’t want her to mention something so personal, so... weak. But his more sensible side knows that it must have scared her, seeing him hurting. He knows she cares about him, in her own blunt, particular way. She must have been thinking about his safety, not how he might feel about it if – and it *was* if – he came out the other side of the experience.

“I’m not damaged Jack,” he says. “I got lucky. And now we know what the problem is, and how I can work on it. Fix it.”

“No-one is expecting you to come back to work until you’re ready. No-one is going to *push* you to come back before you’re ready.”

“As long as you really do let me back,” Will says, firmly emphatic. “I’m not about to let this scare me off. I just have to be a bit more careful what I look at, that’s all. This is what I do, it’s what I’m good at.” It’s a lie, he is scared, of course he’s scared. Of how much he’ll have to do to adapt to this. But for the moment it is subsumed by his own determination. And, although of course he’s not going to mention it to Jack or anyone else except perhaps Hannibal, he’s not willing to give up the highs that come with slipping into the mind of a Godling-killer. He needs that borrowed violence to stay sane, in the Royals’ world.

“Don’t make any sudden decisions,” Jack says, patting his knee. Will stops himself from glaring at the hand. “After something like this...”

“If you’re worried about my sanity, don’t be,” Will replies, feeling cold and hard. He is *not weak*. “My job gives me a sense of purpose. I’m helping people. My work gives me a sense of stability. Trust me, I’m saner doing this than not.”

Jack doesn’t look like he believes him, although Will isn’t trying particularly to check too hard. The Agent gives him a final pat, then rises, plucking his coat from where it had been resting over the back of his chair. “Rest, Will. Recover. Come back when you think it’s best for you, not for anyone else.”

He leaves Will with a burning growl of discontent in his belly, a vague frustration not easy to shake. Yes, it was a horrifying experience, but at least now he knows what is going on in his head, can find some way to fix or work around it. He’s not going to let it force him out of the only real society he takes part in, turn him into a hermit living in his house in Wolf Trap living on the fish he catches in the river. He will *deal with it*, like every other fucked up thing inside his head.

He stays in bed because there's nowhere else to go, and much as he's feeling better, he's not recovered enough to go home just yet. He knows his body well enough to know that much. Although he fears more nightmares are inevitable, he might as well use the opportunity to try and catch up on his sleep. Elder Gods know he's not been getting enough of it lately.

Jack is not the only visitor he gets. Both Beverly and Hannibal pay him a call in the four days it takes Will to recover to the point where he can go home, although he was warned on leaving that he would be foolish if he overextended himself. Beverly was collected as ever externally, although Will thought he was passively picking up a little guilt that she hadn't got to him sooner. They talked about mostly trivial things, although he made sure to thank her for what she had done for him, as well as mention that she had acted in time to save him from a much worse fate. Hopefully that helped. It was difficult to imagine Beverly affected like that, but there it was.

Hannibal was harder to read, as always. He expressed his worry, asked Will how he was feeling mentally; they had what amounted to an attenuated version of any of his visits to the lushly-appointed office back in Baltimore. The psychiatrist seemed pleased that there was no obvious damage, and at least appeared to believe that Will was telling the truth that there genuinely wasn't any. The edge of panic and fight-or-flight that Will had often noticed in himself in Hannibal's presence, which had slowly been growing less with persistent exposure, now seemed to be quieted entirely by something warm that spreads out of him through a point in his chest just behind his sternum. It was an emotion that didn't quite fit, didn't quite seem like it belonged to him, but... Perhaps he was just in denial.

There had to be a reason he had never insisted on boundaries when it came to Hannibal.

Will puts such thoughts out of his mind when he leaves for home. He has enough to do adjusting to being back, to being psychically open, without thinking of particular confusions. He'll have to get a tutor, one who doesn't mind coming out to the sticks, to teach him to close himself off when he needs to. Although he can avoid looking at any crime scenes where there's even a hint of Godling involvement until then, he'll never be truly safe going back to work until he has this under control.

It grates, this restriction placed on him. The itching, open, tenderness behind a thin shield of bone, as he slowly learns awareness of his increased sensitivities, how it feels to his perception of his mental state. Will is constantly in a persistent bad mood, feeling low, irritable, snappish, though never bad enough for him to call it depression. At least he has his dogs. They are uncomplicated animals, expressing only love, excitement, simple hunger. He can be in their presence without pain, immersed in their minds and selves and warmed by their devotion.

Their Angel-Maker is caught eventually, or rather it turns itself in, wounded in a self-inflicted pattern for reasons that no-doubt made sense to its own mentality. It's a strange, gangling creature, he sees in photographs in the papers he has delivered. There's a certain resemblance to the creations it shaped out of living flesh. Will refuses to allow himself to make any attempt to work out why it gave itself up. He's had enough of that particular, poisonous, flavour of alien mind. He still has shivers of strange nightmares that fade on waking, leaving faint impressions of eldritch geometry. This is another of those cases which is best forgotten.

Thankfully it appears that crime is at an ebb in the next few months, with barely a case coming the way of their department. Will doesn't have to feel guilty about taking time off, by no means able to come in for work just yet. Psychic tutor finally obtained, he is making slow and careful progress, and aside from boredom the break seems to be good for him. He has visitors enough to satisfy his

social urges, including psychiatric house-calls from Hannibal. Boredom chafes, but more than that is the current impossibility of seeing Abigail. She still isn't cleared to leave the hospital for any great stretch of time, and Will can't go there as he is now. The patients tend not to have good mental defences, and he is still too uncontrolled. He would see down to the heart of them.

When something does come to light, it is more the echo of the past than anything new. A man, Godling, who was incarcerated in the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane two years previously, has killed a nurse in a way which implicates him in the crimes of the Chesapeake Ripper. Jack's own particular nemesis. The reporter Will had met, Freddie Lounds, has managed to acquire enough details to write about it, and now there's something of a press furore.

Will is still not capable of visiting the crime scene, or interviewing Dr Abel Gideon, but he can advise Alana, who has spoken with the being in the past. Film recordings of their consultation are posted to him, and he goes through them carefully. This is his empathy based on evidence, on body language and micro-expressions and all those snippets of information that can easily overwhelm when not chopped up into easily digested morsels with the help of the pause button. He doesn't need any psychic ability for this.

Ultimately, he'd probably be more useful if he did. Dr Gideon – who may have similar playful ideas as their last killer, having chosen two figures from old human mythology as his Names – has enough of Royalty in him to be mostly impenetrable without being in the same room. And that would likely be a disaster. Will does not think though, looking at him and at the crime scene photographs, that this is the Ripper. There's something a little too... flamboyant. Trying too hard. It doesn't feel genuine.

He's a strange creature, stocky, something more vicious and feral than usual about him. But flighty too, over-alert, with clever, deep-set eyes that flick around his environment, taking in everything. There's an almost animal cunning about him. Looking back through his records, he'd killed as often as his allotment permitted him to and petitioned for more, before he'd turned on his family in a fit of unstable rage. If he's as much a predator as any of Royal get, then he's an uncontrolled one. A fox in a henhouse.

Alana doesn't get anything out of him that he doesn't want to give her, although he has a strange kind of respect for her rank. It's not obsequious or anything like that, and he peppers his otherwise genteel speech with the odd vulgarity for the effect, but he's still almost chivalrous. Not because she's near-Royal; it seems inorganic, like something he's playing up because he feels he ought. If he isn't the Ripper – which seems more likely – then perhaps he truly *believes* he is.

Once the crime scene at the institution has been processed, the nurse's body is brought back to the labs at Quantico. Knowing he'll have to test himself at some point to monitor his progress Will steels himself to come in and take a look, share his insights. He's not been giving his lectures since the incident; leaving them to be parcelled off to Alana and various substitute lecturers working from his prepared materials. Going back will be strange. There's no particular best time for it either, since the natures of the various Godlings who spend time there mean that night or day, there will always be someone around. Late afternoon is relatively quiet, though, so he chooses then to drive in, keeping himself tightly contained the whole way. Speed is an asset; by the time he can focus on the presence of another mind, it has whipped away, and the metal in the frame of the car is an insulator by itself.

Thankfully Will encounters only a few other beings in the hallways, but as he makes his way through the familiar tangle of arcane architecture that is the FBI building, he becomes aware of

how psychically active this place is. It's not that he hadn't known this before, but knowing and feeling are two entirely different things. Impressions of the past, present and future, of the weight of years of Royal blood variously attenuated in living bodies pressing its way into the fabric of the human world, has rendered reality thin here. It feels dangerous.

The morgue and laboratories are no better. Here the stink of death is more than physical, it is written into the air, old ghosts crying out in their pain and confusion and slowly dissipating, etching impressions of their lives into space and time. Will does his best to ignore what remnants and revenants still coagulate around him, and focus on what he has come here to see.

"You're back!" Beverly says, seeing him and beaming. "Not for good, obviously, but it's wonderful to see you. How are you feeling?"

Fragile, is the first, traitorous, thing that comes to mind, but with Jack in the room that's never going to pass Will's lips. "Unsteady," is what he says instead. "But getting less so all the time."

"Steady enough to look at bodies again?" Zzzzeller asks. "This one's a doozy."

"I've seen the photographs," Will replies. Naturally, taken *in media res*, before clean-up, those were worse. In some ways. There's nothing like physically being in the room with a corpse, particularly with his new-found sensitivity. It becomes real in a way that images can't really impress upon you. Five senses (six really, now more than ever) are more effective than one.

The nurse is nearly human, with only a slight point to her ears and unusually shaped pupils to betray ancestry that must be centuries back. Worst of both worlds at that point, Will reflects. Not accepted by humans, looked down upon by Godlings, no power to elevate you even the slightest above the mortal masses. She must have been thankful for her job, that she *had* a job. Look where that got her.

Blinded, impaled, her body a mess of ugly wounds and carved open so that her organs could be removed. It's a match, an exact match, he's been told, for the injuries inflicted on the second to last known Ripper victim. The last one they have solid evidence for, at least.

"There's no detectable consistency with the Ripper victims," Beverly tells him. Will's read the files, of course, but it was still just before he began his work here. The whole thing with Miriam Lass... a warning now, whispered of in FBI legend, an example to future trainees. "He doesn't hunt those of the Blood exclusively, it's humans as well, and he doesn't discriminate in any other ways either."

"I see the Ripper, but I don't *feel* the Ripper," Will explains, as the culmination of looking over everything they've given him before coming here. The physical evidence in front of him only concretes it further. "This is plagiarism. The Ripper would never repeat himself. He would see it as... uninspired. Gauche."

"We never made any of the wound patterns of the Ripper victims public," Jack replies, although Will can tell he'd be able to be convinced either way.

"You know there are ways of finding these things out," he says, grim. "But it almost doesn't matter. If Dr Gideon *is* a plagiarist then the *real* Ripper is going to make sure everyone knows it. This might prompt him to kill again. We'll find out what the truth is just by waiting."

"I'd rather it didn't come to that," Jack says sharply.

“I think we all would,” Beverly replies.

Since sinking severed part of self into Prophet-Will, awareness of mortal has been constant, wearing weary bones and tender thoughts like second skin. Crept tendrils out into spaces between, slotting into emptiness, not touching too hard, too fast, too rough. Human must not be changed, must not lose that which makes him shine in past-present-future. Turned own fires against self, burning brain-meats in anguished anger, enacting clumsy transformation in mock of Gods that failed against stubborn clay of mortal flesh. Hannibal had to calm and quench, for fragile membrane cover of mind’s eye had incinerated in fulsome heat. Too soon. Gradual opening had been plan, gradual coming into fullness of powers.

Yet results not displeasing. No damage done. Health returning, fires turned outwards once more. Insubstantial eidolon-self burrowed deep by heart, salt-sea blood cooling mammalian heat. Will live, survive, grow stronger for what has been seen.

Abigail is also progressing well. Devoted youngling, fierce with learned obedience, with since-birth zealotry. She has buried knife in tender flesh and offered soul up to Hannibal her God without hesitation. Girl’s passions fiery too. Will slay for him, kill for him, do whatever he commands. Already tasting fresh power in back of throat, power not wrested from prey but laid on altar under his own stars. Sweet, so sweet. Memories of times past, of worshipers now dead or taken. Of Old Country.

There is one black spot to mar this perfect vision of world. Name-thief, kill-claim stealer, false witness. Lesser bloodline bound with mortal flesh and bound by iron bars for other crimes. Petty laws that hold his kind, that would not hold Hannibal e’en were he caught. (It is not laws that make him slink and stalk in shadows like constant hunt without end. Power great but not yet great enough for War-In-Heavens.) This lesser, this Abel Gideon with Roman God-stolen names, has transgressed and his lies spread and taint the air with their untruth.

Has plan to show Jack Crawford errors made. Things preserved in time-without-time, voices made part of self and subsumed to whole but still capable of extrusion. Let him taste old guilt and wonder.

Confirmation that Gideon is not the Ripper comes quickly, but Will can at least be grateful that it does not come bloodily. Not with any that’s freshly spilt, anyway. He’s called back to Quantico the next day by Jack, too angry to let him remain out of this when any lead however small may lead them to their prize. A message left on his phone, with the voice of an old favourite or protégé, the trainee Miriam Lass. The call cannot be traced, but making one that could would not be characteristic of the Ripper. The Godling is too smart for that.

It doesn’t leave them with much to go on except the knowledge that Dr Gideon is either lying or mistaken or being manipulated, but that is more than they had the day before. Lacking anything else specific to do, and not yet ready for the hour’s drive home after such a short time here, Will heads to his classroom. He might not yet be up to teaching, but he can put together lesson plans, assemble slides, take some of the weight off those who are kindly standing in for him.

The Quantico building presses in heavy around him. The brick seems a physical weight on his shoulders. It knows him though, knows he is one of its own, and so it is not oppressive, although

not comforting either. The shadows watch and whisper like gossips. If Will wanted, if he was willing to risk it, he could look closer at them and hear what they say, see what they hide. He doesn't want to, particularly. Sometimes the dark things, not quite Gods and not quite anything else, mutter things to him in his dreams, echoes of the greater Void, an unthinking, instinctive deity that even the Royals respect, but they are never clear, and it has not happened since before he met Hannibal, at the very beginning of the Hobbs case.

In the darkness of the lecture hall a great lassitude takes over him. He sinks down behind his desk, strewn with papers no longer familiar, now relevant only to others. The centre point of his forehead aches just below the point of pain, and he rubs it fruitlessly, running fingers through the curled tangles of his hair. Something pulses like a massive heart a long way beneath his feet, so that it feels as though the floor is shuddering with its beats. The room cossets him like a hot, thick blanket.

He hears a tapping, coming closer. Through the door he sees it, just a glimpse before it ducks its head, spreading antlers slipping through the frame. Knowing, liquid eyes meet his own. The stag with raven feathers, the beast of his dreams that has a meaning he does not know and cannot work out. The snorts of its breath are a harshness that stirs the air in gusting clouds.

"Will?" someone is saying. "Will?"

Alana. Alana and Jack both.

"We have a plan and we'd appreciate your opinion," Alana says. Will sits up straighter, blinking away the haze of the vision like rising from sleep. Perhaps he *was* sleeping. Hard to be sure.

"Uh, a plan to do what?"

"We have a direct way of communicating with the Chesapeake Ripper, and we'd like to see if we can push him," Jack says, which is really only partially an explanation, and also sounds like a terrible idea.

"Push him *how*, exactly?"

"We might be able to influence him to become visible," Alana explains.

"If we can enrage him," Jack adds.

"*Enrage* him?" Will asks, disbelieving. "You want to push him out in the open, push him to *kill* again?"

"No, not kill, not if we can help it," Jack says. "What we want to know is if you think there's a way we can push the Ripper and focus his attention."

"His attention is already focused; on Gideon and on you! He's given you the phone-call as proof he isn't Gideon, and I hesitate to think what he might do if you don't take it!"

"I have to push Will," Jack says. Will understands his meaning. It's Crawford's nature. He's a predator and he can't give up on his prey. That the Ripper has eluded him so far is a big enough blow to his pride and source of anger without letting this opportunity go.

“So how do you intend to go about this?” he asks. He doesn’t have to like it, but he has little choice but to go along with what Jack wants.

“At the moment Gideon is nothing but a tabloid rumour. I want to make him a fact.”

Will can see where this is going already – he’s had time whilst on sick leave to catch up with crime reporting in the Baltimore area, after those comments from a certain journalist concerning rumours about him. “You want to get into bed with Freddie Lounds.”

Although he’s invited, Will declines to attend the meeting with Lounds. He disliked her when they first met, and he has no desire to repeat the acquaintance. At least he has the excuse of his continuing psychic vulnerability to allow him to beg off. He’d be surprised if the journalist *didn’t* have some form of telepathic ability, and this will all work so much better if she doesn’t know she’s being used.

So the bargain is struck, the reporter permitted an interview with their fake, setting wheels into motion. The bait dangling on the hook. Will still doesn’t believe this wise.

Once the article is published and in circulation, it does not take long for the response to come. To his relief, it is more subtle than open blood-letting, but with that particular cruel bravado that’s characteristic of the Ripper. Whatever sort of creature he is, he clearly can’t walk through walls or transport himself past the wards and enchantments the Baltimore Institute for the Criminally Insane uses to keep its inmates where they belong. Gideon is for the moment out of his reach, so he turns to the one who is taunting him with these printed lies. Jack receives another call, on his cell straight from his house, a repetition of what came before. Miriam’s voice pleading in her last moments. A bolus of guilt straight to the gut, made worse by the violation of his own space. Lucky that his wife was out of state at the time.

Will goes to the scene with the others. Every passing day he works over the lessons and exercises he has been taught, and every day he grows a little stronger. A little more able to face the nature of the world under the layers of his more mundane senses. Jack’s home is nice, he thinks, looking it over. A generously sized place in the suburbs, on a quiet street, set back from the road and shielded from view by high hedges and trees. Psychically quiet too. There’s no obvious sign that a murderer was here mere hours before, not until they reach the bedroom, where the sheets are rumpled, and there’s an impression of a head on the pillow.

“In my house,” Jack snarls, every muscle bunched with tension hard as iron, woody flesh seeming carved and more solid than ever, casting about with a gaze and rage like fire. “In my *bedroom*. Where my wife sleeps!”

Jimmy is pulling fingerprints from the phone to take back to the lab for comparisons, though none of them are likely to be the Ripper’s. He’s too careful for that, too meticulous. He’s never left a trace of useable evidence before, even angered as the plan had intended he wouldn’t get that sloppy. Will leans back in a corner, unobtrusive, sweeping over the room for anything that might jump out at him. He keeps a tight hold of his mind, confining it to the borders of his skull. Now is not the time for looking deep. Not here. Too personal. He sees enough of Jack without burrowing into his safest place – safest before this moment.

“There’s hair on the pillow,” Beverly announces, plucking it away from the cotton with delicate tweezers. “Long, blonde, quite fine.”

Jack closes his eyes. “Miriam had blonde hair,” he says quietly. Silence falls for a long moment as they each contemplate the implications. A body? A *head*? Worse yet, a *scalp*? Any of them could have been preserved, brought here... taunts piled upon taunts. The unknown details of a death ready to be revealed in their horrific glory as the Ripper pleases.

Will is the first one to break the lull. “Jack, did Miriam know where you lived?”

“If she wanted to know, she was smart enough to find out,” Jack replies.

“She could have told the Chesapeake Ripper before he killed her.” It’s the most likely explanation for this. The addresses of FBI agents are hardly a matter of public record. He’d not have found out by any other route without considerable time and effort.

Will is sure they are all aware of this, but he feels the need to put it into words. Vocalising the motivations of killers is his job description. “Whoever made that phone call thinks you were close to Miriam Lass and feel responsible for her death.”

Jack makes no move to deny it.

In the midst of all this, Alana is carrying out her own investigations. There remains the matter of how Dr Gideon came to believe that he is the Ripper, how he knew the pattern of wounds to copy, despite the considerable evidence that prior to this his only crimes were the murders of his family. Will has been party to her suspicions during strategy meetings at Quantico, and knows she has been visiting their surgeon in prison, testing the waters. Spending time too with the reputedly unpleasant lead psychiatrist, Dr Chilton, who has reason to want such an acclaim as having the Chesapeake Ripper behind bars in his own facility.

Will has not had the displeasure of meeting Chilton himself, but Alana has been sufficiently annoyed by him, despite her normally easy-going personality, that he can be glad for that. The Godling’s reputation is as a supercilious and conniving being, just the sort who would be interested in the shape and taste of Will’s mind despite Jack Crawford’s protection. It would be dangerous just being around him. Thankfully there is no need for Will to use his talents to try and get inside Chilton’s head.

“Psychic driving,” Alana tells him after a dinner with Chilton at Hannibal’s home. Her plumage ruffles and she has to smooth the feathers down repeatedly. “His *arrogance* – and incompetence; I am not sure he is even entirely aware that’s what has happened! But there’s no proof! Even if we get a court-order for his notes, I doubt they’ll be complete.”

“You’re saying that even though we’re sure now that Dr Gideon isn’t the Ripper, we won’t be able to go after Dr Chilton for pushing him into murder?” Will asks.

“No,” Alana says in frustration. Will understands her feelings – or can at least understand what he’s assuming are her feelings. It’s unlikely they are both approaching this from the same angles of morality. “Security will be tightened up, Dr Gideon’s privileges will not be restored, and if we’re very lucky we might get the Ripper to show himself and catch him, but Dr Chilton cannot be touched.”

It isn’t justice, but Will has never truly expected there to be justice. The best he generally hopes for is some kind of approximation of it. It doesn’t mean it doesn’t burn sometimes, the black, frothing

wave of anger he keeps suppressed most of the time, rising with force inverse to the degree of Royal heritage of the victims. There's little satisfaction to be gained from this case, although there may still be a chance to put the Ripper behind bars, but only if they can goad him into making a mistake.

Will isn't hopeful.

Chapter 5

The next taunt – and final, since Freddie Lounds gets hold of it and immediately issues a withdrawal of her previous piece, no longer willing to continue the charade in the face of a possible gift of an article to the Tattler’s rivals –by the Chesapeake Ripper comes in the same morbid form that is his trademark. Another call to Jack’s phone is traced back to an old observatory outside the city, a foolish project to map an unchanging sky looking out upon alien stars. It’s been abandoned for decades.

Will gets a lift to the scene in Beverly’s car. It’s a short and comfortable drive in friendly silence. Will doesn’t know quite how to talk to Beverly now, after she saved his life, but told Jack things he’d rather have been kept quiet. He’s mostly over the latter part; thinking about it logically he can imagine that Jack would just have cajoled or intimidated it out of the hospital staff if she hadn’t spoken, so he can’t really blame her. He owes her far more than some pettiness of his own insecurities. If she’d acted slower he would be dead, or worse, brain-damaged past the point of all function, useless except as a piece of food for some hungry Royal.

“What was Miriam Lass looking into, before she disappeared?” he asks her, as they approach the building up between overgrown lawns of wild grass and weeds.

“Medical records,” Beverly replies. “If the Ripper was a surgeon, she thought he might have treated one of his victims.”

“They retraced her steps?”

“Those they could find. She made a jump somewhere they couldn’t explain.”

“She had abilities didn’t she?” Will has read the files, remembers some details, but not the precise ones of just what Miriam could do that made her stand out to Jack from the crowd.

“A kind of intuition. Not quite like yours but... you make jumps too. If Jack could be sure you were up to it, he’d have you looking over her last movements, trying to find whatever connection she made.”

She sounds unhappy. “You wouldn’t approve?” Will asks.

“If you told me you were okay with that, and I believed you,” Beverly replies. “But you and she aren’t the same.”

“The evidence has to be there before I can make those jumps. But maybe... less so now. Or less tangible evidence.”

Jack is waiting for them at the top of the steps leading up to the entrance. He nods terse greetings, stiff and impassive, cutting their conversation short. “The last call left something the others didn’t,” he says, jumping straight into the reason they’re all here. “A number.” He lifts his cell to make the point. It dials, and the answering ring emerges in echoes from the building at his back. It makes them all jump, even though they were expecting it.

Time to see what sort of surprise the Ripper has left them.

Aging equipment draped with dusty sheets, air full of shadows and the kind of dark, creeping things that gather in abandoned places. Colours blend into one another enough that it takes a moment to notice what has been left on the table in easy line-of-sight.

It's a limb. A hacked off arm. Bloodless and pale as chalk, thin, elegant claws on a hand with two thumbs, wrapped around a cheap, disposable phone buzzing away in time with Jack's. Darker areas of discolouration, cause unknown. At least the edge is clean. A quick, professional cut just below the elbow.

There's a note. In a red scrawl of disguised hand-writing; 'What do you see?' Will's gaze tracks upwards, to the great cylinder of the telescope pointing a dull and unseeing eye at the empty skies above. Wait for night. Perhaps some meaning has been carved in the adjustment of angles and declination. The stars have their particular significances, fixed in the alignment that called down the Gods.

It is not his field. This scene is sterile, wiped of emotion, no prickling through his mind of someone else's perspective trying to get in. The Ripper was controlled here. Inhumanly controlled, but no surprise there. He has gone over this place and licked it clean, devoured stray psychic eminences. Was this because of Will in particular? He didn't miss the fact that the Tattler had written about his accident, and they all know the Ripper reads that rag.

He leaves the observatory to those who might be able to tease something out of it. Goes outside, lets crisp autumnal air whip his hair and brush troubled thoughts out of his head. The air smells cold and crisp. Leaves have started to turn, becoming beautiful in their death. With Lounds' retraction, and a trio of calls to Jack matching the usual triad that his murders take, the Ripper will likely be done with all this. If he has left no clue, there'll be nothing else until he starts his cycle all over again. It has been two years. His name has started to slip out of easy popular culture fame.

He'll be back again soon. Will is certain of it.

The humiliation of insulting Godling-investigator is over and done with, with outcome satisfying. Lies withdrawn and admitted to. The fraud yet remaining in iron prison, no longer of consequence, not to be allowed to strike again in mimicry and mockery, repeating old sacrifice without knowledge of meanings. Searching multiple futures all worlds are without outcome where half-blooded transgresses again. Many possibilities, many dull, but not that.

Godling Jack came to office for confessional, for succour and mercy given as befitting Hannibal's lesser mask. At the whims of his God-self. Tainted by hope bitterly dashed, effervescent and then tossed to pitchy depths like fallen cup of water. Sweet thoughts in turbulent mind, that Hannibal regretfully leaves alone, for in tasting would surely be detected. Passive lapping-in subtle enough, but preying... Ah, no. A pity.

Jack spills soul in tattered misery, in rekindled guilt. Knowing truth, Hannibal lets self laugh behind mask as falsely offers words of comfort, of analysing situation for rational face removing little horrors. Drinking together, companionship, without truth. All is as planned. All is its own perfection.

Speaking of plans, it becomes necessary to move on with his own. Prophet-Will healing from flame-scars, mind opened up to greater possibilities. Time to prompt next step, wilful shedding of

ichor-blood, moving from lesser prey-thing to greater strengths. Still prey, for what is not prey next to the puissance of his Royal Self? But will be better. More worthy. Shaping into what-could-be.

Abigail too. Growing her strength. Teaching her ritual, words and phrases and summonings, morsels of his power. Whispering through little idol-self, guarding dreams and moving into paths that are his, that walk his roads, that glorify his forms and aspects great and terrible, strike love and fear into her tender, still-young heart. Have her spill more blood in his Name. Accumulating slow sipping of mortal souls absorbed into the overall wonder of his salt-bitter blood and aeons-beating heart.

For now, must look ahead to futures that might yet be and choose one to best fit his ends. Possibilities and potentialities make glorious shapes in spreading clouds from present instant, multitude of futures waiting to be pulled into the real. One strikes attention as useful. Bloodied and reeking of symmetries, of mistaken identity and not quite theres. Unstable youngling thin-blood whose brain throbs and thrives on knives that part flesh and open up inner secrets, simple chains of mechanisms and happenings explaining mortal maladies. What little prompting he might take!

Settling on course of action, Hannibal lets visions drop away. Knows what must be done, and how. Setting up antagonist in shadow-play, villain for silver-armoured knight to charge in and defeat, slaying dragon and watering black earth with emerald blood.

Hannibal lets pleasure of surety well up, of certain outcome. Prophet-Will shall boil his hate and strike with it as avenging warrior of name's meaning. Kill one of tormentor race, realise further true nature, become own potential. And then... And then...

All will be as it must be.

Feeling stronger than he has since the Incident – which has come to bear a capital letter signifying its import in his mind, with justification – Will finally returns to teaching. One thing can be said for the current crop of FBI trainees; for those who have descended from Royal blood, they are not particularly malevolent. Through the weighty blanket of psychic atmosphere the very building drapes over him, he can pick up only the briefest of impressions from their silent, attentive faces, on top of what he had been able to detect even before. In the moment of learning, their thoughts are singular enough to be untroublesome. Interest, curiosity, concentration... It lets him know that they are learning, at least.

The Ripper cases strong in his mind after the Miriam affair, he has been reading up on them in his spare time, of which he still has a lot. Analysis confirmed that the severed limb did indeed belong to her, and examination of the stars through the aperture of the telescope had returned merely warnings. Constellations spelling fated doom, evil stars, bad omens. Meant for Jack, but giving them nothing that was not already clear.

With reading comes some stab at understanding the killer's motivations, his disgust for certain individuals that led to the taking of lives he does not believe they deserve. So, as is his habit, Will lectures. Works out his theories by speaking them aloud, tasting how they sound on the air, knowing the ring of discovered truth.

Nine victims so far and there will inevitably be more. Each mutilated, each displayed, each a work of savage, murderous art.

Sooner than he anticipated, it seems. Jack phones him in the small hours one morning, and Will knows it must be something significant, since Agent Crawford has been leery about allowing him back into the field at all. He is still more than partially convinced of Will's mortal fragility. That this is suspected as being the work of the Chesapeake Ripper, then, is not as surprising as it might have been.

Jack picks him up for the drive to the hotel on the outskirts of Baltimore. It's awkward between them, in a way it hasn't been since Will started working for him. He passes on the details of the crime without emotion, with a strange professional distance. They've never been precisely friendly, but they've known each other for over a year now... Will is wired and awake with swiftly gulped caffeine, and the oddness of the situation makes him itch under his skin.

"The victim was found in the bathtub," Jack is explaining. "There were abdominal mutilations and organ removal on the scene. The vic is human, but the local PD know the Ripper's pattern, they knew to call me."

"It's not like the Ripper hasn't killed humans before," Will replies, rubbing specks of sleep from the corners of his eyes. "Still... in a bathtub. Not sure that's his sort of scene. More like an urban legend; not very original."

"I've had the room sealed. You'll get it fresh." Jack sounds... worried. Will wants to bite out something snappish, but holds himself back. He's better than he's been, mind all closed off, safe and away. He's sitting right next to Jack and not reading him at all, easy as it would be. Jack continues; "Listen, all you need to do is tell me whether or not it's the Ripper. Surface deep. That's all. Don't look too close."

"Jack, I don't know what the Ripper's psyche looks like," he feels obliged to point out. "I can tell you something about the character of whoever did this, but without seeing one of his scenes before, I would *have* to go deep if I wanted to be sure."

"You saw the observatory didn't you?"

Will shakes his head. "Not a kill-scene, nothing recent. It was about you, not about the victim. It'll give me an idea, but as concrete as you'd need..."

Jack opens his mouth to protest. Will cuts him off quickly before he can say anything that has a decent chance it'll be patronising. "I don't *intend* to look deep. I've got a very sure grasp of exactly where my boundaries lie, and I know when not to push. Later, in a few months? But before then there's no need to worry I'll do something foolish."

Jack sighs, but seems to accept this. They settle back into silence. There's the radio, but it wouldn't feel right, on the way to something as serious as murder. A human victim. Will can feel the distaste of it at the back of his throat, oily with anger. He's read enough of the Ripper to intensely dislike him. Not hate him, not as much as he hates some Royals and Royal-kin, not with him killing Godlings too which makes up for nothing but sets some good against the pit of his evil.

"You're expecting another couple bodies after this one?" he asks finally.

"If it's the Ripper, yes I am."

"Don't let the Ripper stir you up." No need for psychic abilities to divine the need for that warning. Not after finding what parts of Miriam the Chesapeake Ripper had deigned to leave them. Not after

that controlled rage, simmering just under the surface, releasing in wild jets of sharp words like burning steam. Will knows his comments won't do much good, but on behalf of their not-quite-friendship, he needs to try. What he'll say is harsh, but that's what's needed to make it sink in. "The reason he left you Miriam Lass's arm is so he could poke you with it."

"Then why not the rest of her?" Weary. That's how Jack sounds. Weary of the whole damnable chase.

"His other victims he wanted to humiliate in death, like... like a public dissection. She was different."

"He was probably impressed that she was able to find him." It seems to be... not quite a comforting thought... Will's skull is itching with a need to open up. To see beneath the surface. It's almost a physiological need, like hunger or thirst. He resists. No getting caught up in Jack's pain. In however his thin-blood mind differs from human.

"He might be starting another cycle Will," Jack points out. "This could be our one opportunity to catch him."

There's one thing about this that's been bugging him, rising now with a more certain realisation. "If this really is the Ripper ripping again, he has your number. He wants to humiliate you personally. Why wouldn't he just pick up the phone?" A beat. "Any more phone-calls Jack?"

"No." The truth. Even if he'd been considering a personal vendetta, Jack knows he needs his team too much to keep things from them. "If this is the Ripper, there'll be two more bodies then nothing, for months, maybe a year! We have a window to catch him but that window will close!"

"The last time it closed I lost the Ripper and I lost Miriam Lass. I don't intend to do that again."

The room is Royal green.

Expensive and upmarket, this hotel. Unusual to find a human staying here, but there are rich mortals despite the prejudice against them. Or perhaps he saved up for a few nights of luxury, a holiday. The thought occurs that if this is meant as a *mise-en-scene* it might not have been the man's money at all. Did he check in under his own name? It wasn't in the briefing packet the local police had sent over, and Will makes a note to check.

Beverly and the others are already here. She lives in Baltimore, Jimmy and Zzzzeller both in the suburbs, whereas Jack lives the other side of Quantico. She's carefully examining some trace evidence trodden into the carpet, but stands when Jack sweeps in, tossing a wing of hair over her shoulder. She nods greetings to both of them.

"No-one's touched the body?" Jack asks.

"For once local police behaved themselves," Zzzzeller snarks, in audible hearing of said police, making neither himself or the bureau any friends.

"It's fairly evident the man's dead just by looking at him," Jimmy adds. "Not like some of our cases, where the concept of death is a little more... fluid."

“I touched the body,” Beverly says, assured enough not to worry about Jack’s irritation. More than Will would risk, given Agent Crawford’s mood of late. “A lot going on with that body. Surgery was performed, then unperformed.”

There’s a splatter of blood-trail soaked deep into the carpet. Falling in stops and starts, mapping a melee. There was a struggle here. Will can taste it faintly on the air. Bitter fear and anger, and surprise.

“Surgery was unperformed with bare hands,” Zzzzeller says. “Sutures clawed open.” A desperate brutality. It waits on the edge, flickering outside his still-tender new shields, waiting to break through and mirror wrack and ruin in the morass of his mind.

Jack looks at Zzzzeller with an unspoken question in his eyes.

“I may have... also done some touching.”

Not so fresh as all that then Jack, Will thinks, but he is not angered by it. As wide open as he could let himself be if circumstance calls, a little psychic contamination is nothing. He knows these people well enough to tell what’s theirs and what is not.

“Pieces of him were torn off,” Jimmy Price explains, taking over the narrative and mapping it with easy gestures. “Leading to the bathroom, like breadcrumbs.” And a little trail of yellow photography markers follows it now, milestones on a morbid road.

Will knows what comes next. Begins to make himself ready. Coaxes his mind into a place where he can start from, slipping the sheer barrier of his glasses from the bridge of his nose and tucking them away. Jack is a heavy presence by his shoulder. Solid as the carved wood he sometimes is; a watchful sentinel.

Will approaches first in his old ways, beginning from the simple facts laid out for all to see. “Surgery wasn’t performed here. There’d be a lot more blood.”

“If he’s moving his victims, he could be performing his mutilations in the same transport,” Beverly suggests. She and the others have taken posts by the door. The bathroom is large, and they are far beyond his working space. Good.

“Find the car, find the killer,” Jimmy says, spelling it out. Will spares a fleeting moment to imagine it said for Zzzzeller’s benefit, pleased by the fantasy. But the thin-blood is not *that* incompetent. The thought is quickly banished. He has something else engaging his interest.

The cooled human corpse in front of him has passed the point of stiffness and slackened once more. It is easy enough to turn his hands, seeing the blood caked under nails, over skin, too much to be anything but his own. The side of his white tee is drying brown, clotted and soaked into cloth. It sticks to the edges of flesh where an incision has parted it and the meat beneath, into the chest.

“He tore open his own sutures,” Will announces. For now his barriers remain up, but the part of him that yearns to *look* is straining against the collar of his will, eroding his foundations. He will cast them aside and dive beneath the surface of reality soon enough.

“It wasn’t to get to his kidney,” Beverly says. “The Ripper already took it with him.”

“What’d he take out of the chest?” Jack asks.

“Going for the heart,” Zzzzeller says, “probably interrupted. It’s intact. Traumatized, but intact.”

It doesn’t ring true. The Ripper is careful. The Ripper is composed. The Ripper is above all, in control. He wouldn’t risk a place he might be seen, a place he might take the risk of having to cut himself short and leave a message of disgrace unfulfilled. An artwork unfinished.

A thought emerges then in the back of Will’s mind with an odd familiarity, but it does not concrete into anything when he pauses and tugs on the thread. The thing unravels, and the connection searching for solidity slips away.

It is a poor attempt at artwork at all, this scene. It draws him in; he can feel its pull, wanting understanding. No, something like forgiveness? But that can’t be right. Still, there are emotions here enough for that and more, individual sharp with the clarity of a heightened moment, but muddled by their numbers. He crouches forward, in, feeling the weight of his attention spiral into a searching point, a scalpel-edged blade. Dimly, he is aware of Jack rising from a crouch behind him, motioning the trio away, closing the door behind him.

The shielding carefully built over the tender organ of his open brain is pulled aside like drawing up shutters. The world assumes a greater aspect. There are colours, scents, tastes and touches imperceptible to his more natural senses, the rush of minds in the rooms around, the echo of impressions of the past and perhaps the briefest taste of the future.

That’s too close to the Angel-Maker’s mind. He shies away from knowledge he is not able to handle. Focuses, with difficulty made easier by tedious, painful practise at the guidance of his tutor’s hand. Time rolls back, as he reads what once was. Blood trickles upwards, returning to liquid form. Skin seals itself. Patterns of crimson are wiped away, waiting to be uncovered.

He follows the welter of emotions backwards. Two minds, moving in time, constrained to a single direction by the inexorable force of the universe and their nature. He knows, already, that this cannot be the Ripper. Calm as the Ripper is, his viciousness lurks beneath the surface. His brutality, which by the fact of what he is is transformed in a kind of savage purity, to unnatural works of art. He is of eldritch blood, and this killer here... is lesser. Too simplistic. Too scared, of what he has unintentionally done. This pattern was not meant to work out in this way. It is skewed, awry.

And yet. Over it all there lies a subtle shadow. If he stretches out his mind it is there, a soft cloak draping hidden influence. A figure moving in the corner of his eye. The suggestion of antlers, and feathers, and something very old. Will shivers. There is a connection here he does not like, to the strange dark thing that has been haunting his waking dreams.

But this killer is not the Chesapeake Ripper despite the obvious similarities. Jack will be pleased to know that much at least. The Ripper would never have let this man awaken, would never have let him fight, in a struggle clearly more matched than not, would never have spread ribs with the creak and crack of bone and cartilage to wrap his fingers around the faltering muscle of a heart with the intent to save it.

Their killer is not human, but he is a predator attenuated, thinned indeed. Easy prey for the motivated.

Will comes back to himself slowly, closing himself down, thankful that there is nothing damaging here to see. He thinks nothing of that last thought, that savage moment, as it quickly dissipates from his memory. He calls out to Jack, wanting to give him the good news.

Abigail wonders if she will ever leave this place. Days drone on, moving in tired circles of group and recreational time, therapy and carefully watched activity. The only times she has alone are morning and evening, bracketing nights that are the sole bright point in otherwise dreary existence. Surely they have to let her leave at some point? Can't keep her here forever. She wants to get back to her *life*. To working out just how that is going to be.

But the nights, oh, the nights! When her God comes to her, lifts her gently down into that world of shadows, whispers soft secrets of ancient crafts into her ear, puts a blade in her hand and adulation in her heart. Her nights are things of power, and wonder. Stained dark with echoes of the great Void, wetted and watered with the blood she spills in sacred compact, trickling hot over her hands, splashing, dripping. When she rises from her bed she has to scrub it from where it has dried under her nails to make herself presentable.

She is becoming holy. She can feel it, a buzzing under her skin, a dawning awareness of a whole other plane of existence lying just beneath what she can see. She looks up through the naked branches of that black forest at stars she is coming to know well, and feels the awe welling up inside her. She walks with breathing hushed, with delicate steps, not wanting to disturb the perfect stillness of that place. It is a God's place, not a human place. She only ever enters at His pleasure, and she knows that she is given a great honour.

He has promised and warned her that he will not give her easy throats for that aged blade forever. Soon she must learn to hunt, in those woods, as she has hunted before. But this time her prey shall not be deer, not baiting her mirrors like a worm on the hook. She will be the predator, the stalker, with face and intention bared. It's the way He wants it, the way things must be, and Abigail is eager for it, eager to prove herself.

She will be Artemis, the ancient mortal goddess from stories He has told her in idle moments whilst blood soaks sterile soil. And He shall sit in the role of Pan.

Stars no longer move, fixed in eternal aspect in planet's heavens, but time and circumstance pass all the same. Greater things exist than even God-self, each all unconcerned with curiosities of little single world, mere ball of common elements. Independent unto themselves, not wishing worship, drawing no power but what was first manifested with. No ascendance, no descent. Merely are. One; Great Void, once fertile womb spilling thousand thousand mutable eldritch-selves into existence, birthing suns, now the weighted eternity between them, the expanse on which all sits. Void has consciousness above and beyond, sends messages at random without time's perception as some Oracle, passing knowledge in the night. Another; Sleeping One where all began, centre-pin and apocalypse. Or All-In-One, the Eternal-and-Beyond, is the Gate and past the Gate. Not of concern to deity-kin, nor deity-kin of concern to them. Yet of kin that are known, there is one with provenance mysterious, unfamiliar without category.

Simple mortal-seeming shaping, well-crafted as own is, but inscrutable as ancient sphinx carved from bones of Black One's son, now walking the sands of the east once more. Met by chance, but chance-fate never seemed natural. Threads warped. Placid, knowing eyes, blank mind unreadable. A mystery to be solved. Bedelia Du Maurier, chosen human name, and mirrored-similar profession.

Natural then, that he investigate. Choose her as part of thin-blood mask and act, dropping certain anomalies to be exchanged for anomalies of her own. A long game they play, but patience is to

spare. The time is the pleasure.

Takes self there now to tease with scraps of plans. If human concept 'friendship' might apply, it would here. Too many similarities, like having sibling-self again. Billions of circuits of this mortal world about yellow star since his spawning and spawn-mates, long since gone, subsumed and devoured into greater self. Giving rise to... well. Better not to speak of old misfortune. Vengeance for that will come.

They speak masks, and the space between stars is the coldness behind eyes. Both chill-blooded, sea-blooded, and relaxing like beasts in the deep trenches, like visitors to half-risen R'lyeh whose God-Ruler came, took, sank once more to more comfortable home. Not without wariness, predators yet, but with familiarity of long acquaintance.

"You will be noticed," she warns him.

"It is inevitable. I will be ready."

"You weren't before," he is reminded. "Slowly, or this confrontation will come too soon."

She would pick his self-stuff clean, if outcome was sub-optimal, an oddly pleasing acknowledgment. Unlikely to have opportunity to return favour. No great enemies hers, no reason to stir from demesne.

She will remain, unchanged.

Will hasn't had an appointment with Hannibal since he left the hospital. It isn't that he's been putting it off, but with the Ripper making himself felt during that business with Gideon, and now this, there hadn't seemed to be... time. Time enough to do his job, to lecture, but not to call and arrange their usual. He'd had his sessions with the psychic trainer, it's true, but he's still going to owe the psychiatrist an apology.

Hannibal is pleased to hear from him though, without any apparent irritation. Will skims lightly over the surface of what he might be putting out, but gets no sense of any emotions hidden. He's not willing to look any deeper, for any number of reasons. He's happy, Hannibal is happy, all is well and they can proceed with the structure they have become comfortable with; discussion of Will mixed with discussion of whatever case is most lately plaguing him.

There was time enough whilst he was still admitted to discuss the effect of the Angel-maker, as much as Will was willing to discuss it which admittedly wasn't much, but they haven't talked about how he has adapted to his new state of existence. Will can reassure the thin-blood on that account. He is more interested in getting to this bathroom Ripper-lite, who would appear so superficially similar if it weren't for the shallow psychopathology of his mind.

"I read the Freddy Lounds article," Hannibal says when he brings it up. Will hasn't yet, but he's hardly surprised the Tattler jumped on this. It's all the things they look for in their pieces, and the Ripper always sells, even when it's acknowledged mimicry. "Another Chesapeake Ripper copy-cat, so soon after Gideon was proved misguided."

"Not a copycat, exactly," Will says. This was its own creature, with coincidental similarities. "Someone looking to remove an organ without killing the man it came from. I picked a few things

up when I read the crime-scene. He's a Godling, but not much of one."

"Have you ascertained for what purpose he removed the kidney?"

Will shakes his head. "We had some speculation about organ harvesting, urban legends. Too many eventual ends for a sold organ though. Not just human-medical. Rituals; there's about a hundred of those. As a sacrifice. Or he might just be eating them himself. Perhaps predator urges without predator instincts."

"The worst of both worlds."

Will nods, the thought distasteful. He can hate Godlings honestly, because they don't feel guilty about what they do. Trying like this to preserve human life when you're doing something so abysmal as stealing parts of them is simply half-measures, a sop to regret.

"And his personality? Have you formulated a profile yet?"

"Likely a medical student or a similar profession. Enough to know basics, but very limited experience. He has anatomical knowledge, dissections skills, but he misjudged his sedation. The death, the accident of leaving the body on display like that... all down to his mistakes. The Ripper is proficient at what he does. He leaves them as art – in his mind at least. There's a great gaping void between him and this... amateur manslaughter."

"You keep coming back to the Chesapeake Ripper," Hannibal notes, watching Will's agitation carefully. Will doesn't even know why he has become agitated like this. Unlike with Zzzzeller, playing irritating Devil's Advocate earlier, there's nothing to prove here.

"There's just something about it. It was a perfect hook for us, for Jack's team I mean. Almost too perfect. The vic is human; we'd never have been involved *without* those similarities." Will runs a hand through his thick curls, half-shielding the place where he is most vulnerable. "I can't say why, but I have this strangest feeling that someone wants us here, looking into this killing. I had this... sense, in that hotel bathroom, of some presence tainting it all. Something manipulating from the shadows."

"I would not advise you to mistrust your instincts," Hannibal says. "Particularly considering your current abilities. If you saw something, I have little doubt there was something to be perceived. You are right that this new crime seems to mirror the Ripper in a way that cannot be ignored. The removal of organs, for example..."

"Ah, but I don't think there's ever been any doubt that the Ripper was eating what he took," Will replies with a bitter smile. "We're less sure with this one."

"Perhaps there is a larger picture that has not yet come to light."

"Some sort of conspiracy?" Not impossible, considering the penchant for secret cults that have always existed even before the stars aligned. Something about some Royals calls for the hidden, for mysteries, even though there's no real need of them. And even, very rarely they say, there is war amongst Gods. "I'll keep that in mind if another body drops."

When another body drops. Will knows this is likely to be just the beginning.

Plans in motion, with piece of separated self goading on weak and lesser Godling, little healer-hopeful with human-flesh hunger woken. Desperate now, and hunting inevitably for more. Thin-blooded prey, an easy kill for Prophet-Will when future threads align at own command, force act of violence, predator nature unconcealed. First step, and shall continue. Prophet Godling-slayer, and Priestess human-slayer, and Devouring Self over and above and worshipped.

Best of thoughts, to offer comfort whilst waiting. What are short months, having lived since before mortal rock first birthed small life? Like blinks of eyes, yet being here by human thoughts surrounded, makes manifest their shortened scale, constrained by time's perception. Moments are moments, for short as might be, millennia made no greater.

For now more bodies must join the trail, mixing spoor with lesser hunter, confusing, casting web. An opportunity for a feast for those his thin-blood shell might term friends, if were not hiding far greater self. Collecting prey long since marked, deaths justly deserved and overdue. Perhaps some to take to own realm, training for Abigail, throats for her knife. Essence and strength consumed by either means, but somehow refined through medium of human adoration. Distilled in taste, sweetened with worship. Empty meat to share between them after, once life licked clean, a holy sacrament. Drive her father's presumptions from associations, replace with tender bites of future promise.

Each stroke, manipulation, future narrows. Comes closer to what must be, to strength and connection echoing out and back through time to make Will's name sit with weighty import on fabric of present. It shall be. Threads of other possibilities wither and die, snap lifeless and impossible. There is no escape for Will. In some he dies, and is raised again with knowledge immortal and unnatural. In some captured as Restorationist and spirited away to hidden places in only god-self's power. In some whole and glorious and angry, splattered with green ichor, hating and loving god-self in equal measure. All are good. All satisfy.

With thin-blood meat about to be put to knife, belly full of screaming soul-stuff, Hannibal sets about creation of great feast with pleasure.

Will dreams. It is a forest again, with bare winter branches, dead mouldering leaves underfoot, and the night sky stretching like the Void overhead. All is dark; mere shapes against stars, shadings of grey and black. He feels a gaping expanse despite the closeness of trunks around him, as though he is just as exposed as he might be on an open plain, or in a desert. He is touched by a sense of being watched. Of some impartial intelligence with its eyes upon him, blank and unreadable.

From the corners of his eyes come movements that disappear when he turns his head. Whispers tickle the edge of hearing. Quiet and almost familiar words. It is impossible to resist the urge to strain to make them out, always on the edge of understanding, never able to make it. This place is wild. Alien. Not inimical to human life, merely uncaring, in the way of the greater universe. In the way of Royalty towards most humans, until that one that piques their interest, who soon wishes he had never been born.

There is no sense of direction in the forest. Will wanders, unsure if he is getting anywhere, but aware that standing in one place is unlikely to advance anything even in a dream. Having come to somewhat expect the architecture of these particular quasi-nightmares, he knows it can only be a matter of time before the feathered stag makes its presence known. Whatever mystery it is trying to impart, whatever it means by shadowing him, he is still unable to work out. Perhaps he is not meant

to work it out. Sometimes such things have no clear meaning, simply random haunting, the universe laughing at the fumbblings of mortal minds which do not cope well with uncertainty.

It is a corpse he comes across first. There is no light, yet the impression of a shift towards redness begins to creep over him. Greys leach into crimson, spreading in a near-black carpet over dampening leaves, rolling wet down the boles of trees. Featureless, the body hanging from the branches has been wiped of all that could identify it, face become a smooth curve of skin over skull. It is bisected, held aloft by the tangle of its intestines looped and tied off, stretched taut as ropes. The blood drips from it, from outstretched fingers and pale toes, visible as though lit without light.

Will shudders, waiting, but nothing else makes itself known. There is simply silence, emptiness, open night at his back and whispers with a hint of laughter in his ears. He looks at the corpse for some time, uneasy, but has to move on.

It is not the only one for him to find. Men and women, all clear of identifying features, all displayed... The Chesapeake Ripper. This is about him. He kills in threes though, always has before, and there are at least five bodies here. Is this some warning of the future? A glimpse of murders to come? Perhaps more than one cycle. But why is he being shown this? What force wants him to know such things, without any way to work out who these victims are, without any way to stop it from happening? What possible purpose could there be to this shadow-play?

He turns away from a man with his skull split, the gaping cavity stuffed with pages torn from books, edges stained pink with blood and remnants of cerebrospinal fluid, feeling angry and powerless. Stops. Goes very still.

The stag is perhaps a meter away, watching him. Will stares back. Wants to edge away, but finds himself unable to move. Fear is burning low in his chest, desperation rising burning up his throat. The beast moves gradually forward, placing the fall of each hoof carefully upon the leafy blanket below. Its eyes are dark pools of midnight, with great depths, too knowing for the animal it appeared to be. Its damp snout reaches forward, tilting the great antlers back and away, closing the last centimetres of a gap... touching lightly against his chest.

And then nothing. Waking. Gasping in sweaty relief with the digital clock by his bedside reading the early hours of the morning and the comfortable weight of at least one of his dogs curled at the foot of the bed.

Another prophetic message from the Void. If that is what this is, and not something else, some obscure Royal versed in the landscapes of the dreaming human mind, some subtler power, some random vagary of the universe itself.

Will shifts uneasily and tries to get back to sleep. At least with it passed, he can be sure of more normal nightmares from this point on.

More bodies begin to pile up. And not from their thin-blood hotel bathroom killer either, but from the real deal, from the Chesapeake Ripper himself. Now Will has faces to put to the mutilated bodies that were shown to him in that haunted, night-cursed forest. As random a mixture of victims as the Ripper always has, mortal and Godling, male and female and neither. All white though, but that's as much chance as choice.

“Hearts, kidneys, livers, stomachs, pancreases, lungs, intestines, even a spleen!” Jimmy Price reels off the list of taken and devoured organs with growing irritation. They are running out of space in the mortuary for them all, lying out now on their tables, displayed in a different, more clinical, way.

“Bit of a coincidence isn’t it,” Zzzzeller says, “that first body, that first killer, just before the Ripper starts up again? These can’t all be his!”

“They are,” Will replies, knowing the anomaly and not liking it one bit. “I’ve looked, and all those scenes felt just the same, and all different from the one in the bathroom. I can’t explain the numbers.”

“Perhaps it’s all this jerking him around lately,” Jimmy suggests. “First Gideon, now bathroom-guy. Perhaps it’s caused him to escalate?”

Jack glowers at that. He looks like a thundercloud, and the ever-present shadows that have made the Quantico building their home lick around his ankles like concerned puppies.

“The whys are irrelevant,” he snaps. “Everyone focus on doing their jobs and *catching* him.”

Easier said than done. With all this evidence, Will should be able to get something more of a read on the Ripper, but there’s something inherently slippery about him, deflecting his mental gaze, confounding him. He can’t fill out the profile much further than what they already know, and no work of magecraft the others have yet come up with has managed to dig up a trail for them to follow.

Nor does he think they’ve seen the last of their bathroom harvester either. Too many coincidences, a wide pattern drawing closed like a net. An unknown guiding hand, motives impenetrable.

There’s a storm brewing. Some deep-buried instinct tells him that. It is fierce and inexorable, and he worries he’s about to be caught up in it.

Naturally with the weight of Jack’s pronouncement hanging over them, everyone stays to work late, and Will is not excused from that. A prickling of guilt and pride won’t let him. He can’t help but feel, with the changes that have come upon him, that he ought to be able to do more here, to help Jack and give him closure by finding this being. And it prickles against his personal pride too, in the capabilities that have led him true in the past.

He needs a safe place to get himself deeper into this case. In this building, with its deep dark heart, his classroom is the most obvious location. Warm and cosseted in shadows that could almost be comforting, it feels like some cave or womb, some burrow in the earth he has dug out and drawn back into. With crime scene photographs spread out on the wide expanse of his desk he allows the slow, beating-heart breathing of the building to lull him, trancelike. Opens himself gradually. Attempts to sink into the mind and self of the Godling who shaped such horrors as works of malevolent art.

Time is lost to him. There are only empty faces, and canvases of gore, and that predator’s hunger and contempt.

Eventually he becomes gradually aware that someone is calling his name. That particular accent, to which the attention of his mind and body are called as though drawn on a string. Will turns, and

with his mind's eye still agape, sees.

He forgets immediately, of course, the influence of that symbiote-self cooling his blood, making itself a guest in the vault of his chest. But for a moment, there is horror, and afterwards a shifting sense of unease. Will blinks, straightens up stretching muscles grown stiff with holding his position, wincing with each twinge.

"Hannibal. What brings you to Quantico?"

"I have a 24 hour cancellation policy," the psychiatrist replies, causing Will to check his watch with a start when he notices the time.

"I'm sorry," he says, feeling half out of place, as though he has slipped from his path through the universe and everything has moved just slightly to the left. For all the insights his trance gave him, which is very few, it does not seem that it ought to bridge that yawning gap of hours. "I was looking deep and... I wasn't aware..."

"No apologies necessary," Hannibal says. "It is likely to happen again, if you use your abilities in this way."

"You know I have to. If I want to do anything about... all this," he gestures wide at the strewn images that litter the lacquered wood, echoes of his nightmare. "Perhaps you could give me your professional opinion, doctor?"

"Sum up the Ripper in so many words?"

"Choose them wisely."

"Oh, I always do." Hannibal begins to sort through the chaos, moving things around, reordering as though searching for patterns. "Words are living things; they have personality, point of view," he muses, with an off-beat way of looking at it that must be the eldritch coming to the fore in him. "Agenda."

"They're pack hunters," Will suggests, knowing the imagery will appeal.

"Displaying one's prey – or enemies – after death has its appeal," the thin-blood notes. "Nor is it an idea entirely foreign to many of your mortal cultures."

"This is an eldritch motivation through and through," Will replies, gazing down at the pierced palm in the picture, its skin crisping at the touch of cold iron. He'd lived for a while; it would have been agony. "Not that I'll deny he's educated enough to draw influences from anywhere, if it'll add the flair he wants."

Hannibal is about to say something else, but they are interrupted by Jack Crawford and Beverly Katz, barrelling into the lecture hall at speed. Beverly's shadow-wings are vibrating out of tune with this plane of existence, no attempt made to hide her excitement.

"Will, there you are," Jack in contrast is more self-satisfied. He stalks. He's coming in for a kill – they must have found a lead. "And Dr Hannibal, what a surprise."

Hannibal nods to him politely, setting the photograph back with its fellows on Will's desk.

"Would you care to help us catch a killer?" Jack asks.

The psychiatrist is clearly pleased to be invited, unsurprisingly. Even for those with the most dilute blood, what Royal-kin could deny the thrill of a chase? “How could I refuse?”

Beverly explains as they hurry out of the building. Going over surveillance footage from the first crime scene at the hotel, noticing the ambulance that did not belong, acting strangely. It’s a solid lead, the first they’ve had and more than Will has been able to give them. In the rush though, he finds himself caught up in the others’ anticipation, in the edge of the predator that bleeds from their thoughts. It’s but a taste, so he does not fight it. Easier to be swept along, enjoying the adrenaline surge.

Hannibal drove here from Baltimore looking for him, and it’s easier to just catch a lift with him. It’s back in that direction anyway. The company in question is based out of the greater Baltimore area. Late as it is, the emergency business is 24 hours. The night shift has Jack’s target building buzzing with activity. The floor supervisor is called over to see to them. He’s a Godling; covered in a long pelt of fur all over, clutching a clipboard in fingers tipped with stubby, blunt claws.

“That ambulance isn’t in rotation,” he protests, though still leading them over to its bay. “Hasn’t even been out of the shed.”

“The surveillance footage says it has been,” Jack replies.

“Well, nobody’s signed her out,” the supervisor grouses, “sheet’s got her down for repairs.”

“Who signed her in for repairs?”

“Devan Silvestri, one of our part-time drivers.”

It’s unsurprising, though still gratifying, when the ambulance proves to be missing, because it means they have almost certainly caught their bathroom killer. The chances of him leading them to the Ripper are vanishingly small, but Will is fairly certain Jack holds out hope that some clue may come of this. The problem is how to find Silvestri now, because if he’s gone, then it’s for a reason.

“Is there a tracker on that ambulance?” Beverly asks. “Amulet or cantrip...?”

“Basic beacon spell, can’t afford nothing fancy,” the supervisor replies.

“He can’t have broken it without raising suspicions,” Beverly explains. “But if he doesn’t know how to shield it, or if he’s forgotten, then we can still find him.”

“Good,” Jack says, voice like velvet in his satisfaction.

From the corner of his eye, Will catches Hannibal’s smile, a sharp thing that for some reason sends an odd shiver up his spine. “This is very educational.”

It should have been simple from there. Scrying had turned up the pulse of the locator spell loud and clear, but they had only managed to follow it for a few short minutes before it wavered and fell out of sync. For whatever reason, Silvestri has remembered that he ought to be masking his presence.

Communicating over the radios with the on-call SWAT team, Jack organises a sweep of the rough area they’d been heading towards to look for the vehicle, searching street by street. The chances of finding the killer have just reduced drastically though, and they all know it. Will listens to the

barked orders, his frustration growing. It's unlikely he'll be of much more use tonight. And there's Hannibal to consider. He's a civilian; this isn't his job and no matter how interesting it might have been academically or otherwise, a long midnight slog seems hardly how he'd want to spend his night.

"A pity," Hannibal comments, parked momentarily by the road-side. "I shall drive you home from here, of course."

"Thanks." Will is grateful for his forbearance. The streets are nearly empty; they slide by dark-windowed buildings under the glow of electric light and the crimson moon overhead. The Bentley's engine is a low purr, satisfied and almost alive. In the silence, in the stillness, Will breathes and is aware of the blood that pumps through his own veins, pulsing at his throat and against the cage of his ribs. It is not cold, nor hot, but the absence of temperature. It feels like they are sitting in a moment stuck out of time, flies in amber.

He doesn't recognise the route they are taking, but he is only paying half attention, and he doesn't know Baltimore that well. They pass into places where things are thinner, more spread-out. There are trees here, and places where there is grass, and the buildings are less well cared for. The streetlights space apart as the distance between them grows. A short-cut, Will thinks, lulling towards sleep, coaxed by the perfect quiet. Cut up towards the road leading out to Wolf Trap.

The car slows.

"Will."

He raises his head, looking over to where Hannibal is sitting, gazing intensely out into the night.

"Will, do you recall the number of the ambulance Silvestri took?"

That gets Will's attention. He raises his head, follows the point of Hannibal's gaze. They are just passing a deserted warehouse, the car slowed to a crawl to better see the shadowed vehicle that has been spotted. It's the same make and model as the one they are searching for, and why would such a vehicle be out here in the middle of nowhere, with no crisis to attend to?

"It has to be him," Will whispers. Hannibal turns the wheel; pulls them in with a quiet crunch of gravel. He parks under the cover of nearby trees. Wilderness has started to reclaim the lot. The engine's purr is cut off and a heavier silence wraps them tight. Will fumbles with the radio Jack had left him, hoping they're still in range.

Static whines. Faint voices, but it might be the background hum of the universe, weighed with ghosts and the never-born under the Old Ones' presence. "Come on," he cajoles it, slipping the tuning around the band of their chosen frequency for the night.

"If it is truly Silvestri," Hannibal notes, "his victim will be in there also. Perhaps they are still alive."

As much tension as already runs hot through Will's veins, that subtle observation feeds the flames higher. Some poor person, some human, knocked sleeping whilst carved open and devoured. What this time? Another kidney? A part of the liver? If he's hungry enough to take chances, then a length of bowel or maybe the spleen? You can even survive on only one lung, Will distantly remembers, although not without difficulties.

He is not entirely aware of his own actions, but before he knows it the car door is open and he is heading towards the silent ambulance, stealthy as possible over the rough ground, already drawing his gun. It won't kill him, even thin-blooded as he is, not with simple steel, but it will slow him down, enough to disable him until help can get here.

Hannibal is behind him, a ghostly observer.

Will reaches the doors, noticing the thin rim of light that leaks out at the edges, around the paper that's been taped over the small windows. Every muscle hums tight with nervous energy. Before he can think better of it, he is slamming the butt of his gun against the metal with deafening clangs, shouting at the top of his voice.

"Devan Silvestri! FBI! Come out with your hands up!"

He retreats far enough to the side that he is not taken by surprise when the ambulance doors slam open. The thin-blood is fast, leaping out and starting to make a run for it before he quickly realises that there are no armoured, armed agents surrounding him and ready to shoot. He turns, but Will has had time to draw a bead. The muzzle of his gun is a maw eager for blood. He can see the slick of gore painting Silvestri's arms almost to the elbows, smeared around his mouth. His eyes are the flat black of a shark, and his teeth the pointed rows of one too.

"Cold iron bullets," Will bluffs. "Don't move."

Perhaps Silvestri just doesn't believe him. Perhaps the harsh hunger that drives him is still raging too hard for any kind of restraint. He does not stop, he does not back down; he lunges forwards at Will, hands outstretched and tipped with scalpel-claws.

Will doesn't hesitate either. He pulls the trigger, and the night's air is split by retort after retort, deafening and bouncing off the building behind like cracks of thunder. Muddy green ichor spurts from entry and exit wounds. Silvestri howls in pain, but it's not enough to stop him. He hits Will and they go down together, a fierce, life-and-death tussle. Will feels the sharp claws rake at his side, not quite long or sturdy enough to cut deep through the layers of his coat and sweater. Razor teeth snap together inches from his neck, blood-rank breath hot against the side of his face.

Will does his best to fend him off, his forearm pressed into Silvestri's throat, his gun tight against the thin-blood's belly, emptying what remains of the clip. In the rush of adrenaline, he has no conception of time. There is only himself, and the powerful body struggling against him, stronger, tougher, fever-hot.

Time and breath returns in a rush as Silvestri is pulled off of him. Will blinks, and sees that Hannibal has him in a headlock, straining to hold back the writhing man who's now tearing the sleeves of his fine wool overcoat to shreds and howling with rage. Silvestri doesn't seem to be conscious of his own actions in these moments. Something about being interrupted, Will theorises, with thoughts made fuzzy by the speed of violence. A blood-hunger for human flesh. Hannibal's always coiffed hair is ruffled and out of place, the dark maroon flats of his eyes seeming to burn with an inner fire.

"Will," Hannibal says, locked in stalemate. "On the right, by the door."

It takes some time for his words to percolate into Will's adrenaline-struck mind, but finally the meaning seeps through. He struggles to his feet and over to the ambulance, where a man lies yet unconscious on the table, the gash in his side leaking a slow wash of blood. There are tools for

operating on the varied morphologies of eldritch-kind strapped here and there under the benches and on the walls, and the one that Hannibal was indicating is a slender iron hammer and chisel made to open chitinous shells.

As soon as he manages to grab the thing Hannibal lets go of Silvestri, letting him sprawl forward at the suddenness. Will does not hesitate. He brings the hammer round in a swing with all his strength behind it. It takes Silvestri in the temple with a wet crunch. He jerks, slumps, and falls motionless. Will hits him again, just to be sure.

Ichor is spreading, a muddy pool who's wellspring is the ruin of his skull.

Will hesitates for a moment, breathing hard, before he remembers the victim. He drops the hammer and sprints, feeling desperately for a pulse.

"He's still alive!"

"Fading fast," Hannibal comments, approaching leisurely, shedding his ruined coat and beginning to roll up his sleeves. "Silvestri was an amateur. I'll keep this man in the land of the living a while, whilst you get in contact with Jack."

Will nods. He's shaking now it's over, now that the rush is fading, but Silvestri's victim has been saved and it's a warm burn of comfort in his belly. The sound of the hammer caving in the thin-blood's skull plays over and over in his mind and it's.... There's a satisfaction he can't put into words. Even now his fingers itch to go back over there and pick it up, smash it into the body again and again until it's nothing but an unidentifiable mess of meat.

It's everything he's ever taken the opportunity to revel in when reflected in the crime scenes of others, and always been too frightened to ever do himself.

He takes a moment to calm down, then goes back to try the radio again.

Will is unsure what he was expecting in the aftermath. When Jack and the SWAT team had found them, he'd not even had a chance to confess his own actions before Hannibal was filling it in with calm assurance, taking the blame for killing Silvestri – although for him, it could scarce be judged a crime to act in self-defence, whereas things could sometimes go sour for a human in the same situation. Jack would probably have let it slide, he's sure, but he's grateful to Hannibal for not putting that to the test.

There are consequences beyond legal action however. Will has killed a man with eldritch blood, no matter how watered down, and it was everything he had ever hoped. Not premeditated but an act in the heat of the moment, yet still as symbolic a slaughter of all his hates and loathings as anything he could have carefully planned. He dwells on that moment, can't help but do so, whenever he sees some wrong that can be laid by whatever means at the feet of Royalty's kin, replays the crunch, the collapse, the glazed dead look of eyes that already held death within them.

It's hard to keep the smiles off his face, at those times. But he has to. Can't let anyone know what he's thinking on pain of death or something much worse. Well. Perhaps Hannibal. He'd confess just to get it out, but he is sure the thin-blood already knows. He'd been there, seen Will's face. He must have looked... feral.

There's a fear that comes with all this joy. It's a fear he's lived with for a long time, but quickened now, magnified by the fact that thought has become deed. Yet as days pass without censure, it begins to ease. There's a hunger, a hunger always present but which Will had always been able to feed in the past with the mirrored emotions of other Restorationist killers. That has changed. He felt too much pleasure, released too much pent-up rage of years and years as prey in a predator's world. Now, justice. Justice, sweet as honey, soothing him as it might sooth a harsh throat.

Be it by Hannibal's actions or simple disinterest, Will has remained under the radar. Beneath notice. But can he sustain that? When he is driven by a need long suppressed and diverted, called up now and strong? If any other fears have left him, that is a new one, and he can only hope it's enough to constrain him, backed by his better judgement.

The universe is not so kind. Not when there are killers all around him, when it is his very job to chase them, to pierce them with the scalpel of his mind and wear their skins like false flesh. Only bare weeks after Silvestri's corpse is interred in the Atlantic, to whatever fates the awful deeps might take it, another case is brought before Jack's team.

The Baltimore Concert Hall. A musician made an instrument. A show as grand as any the Chesapeake Ripper might have dreamt up, save that it cannot be him for nothing was taken. The Godling's throat has been laid open, steel-grey skin parted, abnormal vocal cords resembling the strings of a cello stretched over the carved neck of that very object. How did their killer know? If the anatomy had been more human, this would not have been possible. It's so select, so specific, as to be unnatural. It must be some ability original to this murderer, and that's at least a clue that might lead them to catch him.

When Will focuses, on the edge of hearing, the hum of the notes drawn out agonising from those taut chords resounds, broadened by select acoustics, something dragged up from unfriendly dimensions and warped into horrifying music.

He had set a bow to this dead creature's throat, their killer, and he had played him, thus crafted from meat and woven collagen.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

When you get to the scene that mentions space, watch this awesome video (that I did not make) - <https://vimeo.com/70532693>

Indescribable, the taste of Will Graham's thoughts in the moment of his triumph. Green fall of ichor-blood, crumbled bone, pain and agony and soul drawn from too-mortal body in sacrifice to name not yet known. Hannibal had not eaten of it. Not yet his to do so. But in time. In time such slaughter would be thus devoted, strength upon strength.

Plan has worked entire. Slender line of control, messages sent to arrange time, place, shut off tracking to provide opportunity as coincidence disguised. Youngling's ancestral hunger awoken by his greater kin – if separate by vast chasms, yet some vague kinship distasteful remains – lost himself and provoked the murderous act. True self unleashing, on both sides.

Hannibal finds himself pleased. Pleased enough for pastimes somewhat neglected, for touches of mortal artistry once unlooked for in ape-risen lesser-things, once curious surprise, now merely enjoyed. Not just own Royal-self, but all Baltimore's kin of note. A company of the refined. As old mortal words spill from thrills of mortal throat, lips red as mortal blood, dress red as mortal blood, all red and hungry and the desperation of the song, crowd's emotion swells and perfumes air with half a hundred minds, pheromones, tidbits to whet expanses of never-full throat.

He allows a tear to fall from thin-blood-seeming's eye. Trickles dark and black as ink and true-self skin. As it falls, licks traces of dissipating food from room, imperceptible.

He notices, spoiling otherwise perfect moment, a certain human lurking between parts of surging crowd, now leaving for reception with promised buffet. Franklin, his patient, neurotic with exposure to God-presence, fascinated all the same. Does himself no good attending such events as this.

Indeed, another predator hovering around him even now. Well-fed sleek, sharp-knife mind, teeth hidden behind falseness of a smile. Not so human-seeming, no need for this one to hide. Some worthy noble, Blood perhaps not quite pure, amused by pet he would have as own. Hannibal watches through narrowed eyes, watches immortal watching him back, wary circling. Does not think he is known, not truly. But hunger awaits, sparking neurones only half in crude mortal dimension; stranger-kin seeing the appearance of prey.

No prey lurks here. A dance. A stalk. A hunt. Long grasping arms to break as shattering spears. Wire-whip limblings scoring iron-strong hide. Teeth that fasten and ichor shed, soon torn from elegant jaws. He'll come looking for a meal, become meal instead.

Hannibal shakes many-fingered hand proffered him with all thin-blood pretence of respect. Bows, and marks fight and feast of future days.

Becoming a predator himself does not make it any easier to slip into the mind of Godlings, which comes as something of a relief. The underlying motives are too different. Will killed from a kind of desperation, a furious stab at justice. Elder-kin, and their Musician most lately, kill for reasons less prosaic. There's a cruelty to the ways the shape the world he finds abhorrent, even now. He slew Silvestri, yes, but he did it quickly, did not draw it out, and left him where he fell. None of this corpse-art. No display. No humiliation. No ritual, no greater consumption.

Yet by letting down the barriers of his mind, as he must to give Jack any scrap of the things he needs, Will can still come into a state of understanding. He can still look, with care. Keeping enough of a wall between them that he does not lose himself, or allow an influence he will not brook as he had so nearly done in the case of their amphibian murderer. He has learned, and is learning more all the time.

There's an alien tang to this musician's mind that he does not much like, a depth that he shies away from. If the outer thoughts are comprehensible, that is only the first act of a greater symphony, and the whole is something ferocious and vast. Will does the best he can, but fears to go too deep. The patterns of the Angel-maker's mind could have broken him utterly. He'll not be drawn into its kin.

This work was not the first. There's a deft hand on the reins, meaning carefully chosen, no over-vulgar flourishes or melodramas of a less experienced mind. He's done this before, their killer, hunted prey and eaten and done... something... with the remains that still remains unclear. Will picks up the pleasure of a craftsman, but not the craft itself. This murder though was not about what could be made from the thin-blood but the message that could be sent. This is not a solo, but the first part in a duet, just waiting for the other partner to join in.

Which is not to say that the choice of victim was not purposeful, within the theme. A musician apparently sub-par for the role he was given, the place he had in the orchestra. He marred the tune, and so was made to sing a tune of his own.

The better question, the one riding over all this, is the name of the one this is all dedicated to. Will has his own suspicions. He wasn't able to dig deep enough into the strains of eldritch mind left behind to make anything out for certain, but who else creates such intricate productions? Who else would value such an exacting work of art?

The Ripper. This is an ode to the Chesapeake Ripper, and more, an invitation.

Will has not yet mentioned this to Jack. It seems unwise, without proof. Agent Crawford gets caught up hard enough in anything to do with the Ripper that having him experience all the stress without certainty that it would even be relevant to that case would be cruel, and unhealthy for everyone involved.

First he has other sources of insight that he can seek out. Hannibal, for one. Always helpful, always knowledgeable, Will would not be surprised if Jack bumped him up to official consultant some time soon. He's been too useful for too long; he's becoming part of the team, even if only carried through the medium of Will-as-messenger for his pronouncements.

He saved his life, wrestling Silvestri off him.

Will cannot be sure why he was so mistrustful of him in the beginning, but surely he has earned that trust now.

“I haven’t yet thanked you for what you did,” Will says. It’s midday, pale late-autumn sun slanting through the high windows. No lights on inside, making it darker in here than he’s used to. He and Hannibal walk in the shadows, circling like a dance. It started unconsciously, for although he knows he is safe from the consequences of the truth here, his instincts do not. He’s seen and heard of what happens to rebellious mortals enough times that it has sunk deep. It’s a fear of bone and blood, not easily banished by any amount of comforting words.

“There’s no need to,” Hannibal replies, selecting a book from his desk as he passes by it, for something to do with his hands perhaps. It is put back before long, arranged with neatness and perfect alignment. “It was an obvious decision with no risk to myself.”

“Still. Thank you.”

Hannibal gives him the ghost of a smile. He’s not much given to shows of emotions. He expresses himself small scale. Will has been learning how to look.

“You are not here to merely offer thanks,” he points out.

“Never am,” Will replies. “There’s another new case I’m working on for Jack.”

“Would that be the matter of the dead trombonist?”

“News does spread fast.”

“In certain circles,” Hannibal allows. “The Baltimore art scene is small. Gossip alleviates the need for publications of uncertain merit.” He’s referring to the Tattler and its ilk, of course. After the amphibian killer, the FBI has been more strict in its control of information to the media, even on such seemingly innocuous cases. It’s a policy that waxes and wanes. Sometimes the media is useful to them, and they are lenient. Sometimes it is not, and neither are they.

“His killer isn’t a thin-blood,” Will says. “I picked up some details, but I couldn’t get a handle on the greater creature. I know motive for this one act – it’s a lure, or an invitation, a performance meant to draw some other killer out – but not what else he might have done, not what or who he is, nothing of a profile we could catch him by.”

“Music mixed with murder,” Hannibal muses. “Even amongst your people, the first instruments were flutes carved from human bone. Every life is a piece of music. Like music, finite events. Sometimes harmonious, sometimes dissonant.”

“Finite is something of a misnomer, with Royalty at least,” Will points out. Hannibal smiles.

“Even Royalty can theoretically die. Or pass on into a state beyond our understanding.”

“Whatever piece of music this killer is, I don’t feel comfortable hearing it.”

“You see more clearly now than you ever have in the past, but there are still places you are unwilling to go.”

“Last time I looked at the wrong Godling, I almost lost my mind,” Will reminds him, although he suspects this to be nothing more than simple verbal sparring, a way of making a point. Hannibal seems to have an unnatural confidence in his abilities, not to mention his mental resilience. As a

psychiatrist, he should have seen enough humans to know better, but perhaps even he has enough of the Blood in him to find Will's fear strange.

"You were not prepared then. With your mental training since..."

Will laughs. "It's because of that training I'm careful now. No, let's get back to what we do know about this murderer rather than talking in hypotheticals."

"He's a poet and a killer." Hannibal shrugs. "As you stated, he is creating a performance."

"A craftsman too." Will explains the process of tanning further examination of the corpse has turned up. Curing the cords to make them easier to play, like catgut. And there was olive oil, a little oddity now made clearer by Hannibal's elucidation.

"So who was this performance for?" Hannibal asks him.

"Uh, I can't be sure. I have suspicions."

"And those suspicions are?"

Will rubs a hand over his face. The evidence doesn't quite support his surety in this, but the link is there under the questing gaze of his mind, a psychic leap. "The Ripper," he replies. "One artist to another. He's playing for the Chesapeake Ripper."

They'll let her go soon, Abigail is almost certain. She's been playing along as best she can, with therapy, with whatever hoops they'd have her jump through, because she's so *tired* of this place. There's something wild in her heart, as the huntress she is becoming, something too fierce for this dull captivity. The people here are nothing more than cut-out shapes, moving in two dimensions, their voices dull roars that say nothing unless she concentrates on them. She is moving apart. She has her God, and she has human blood on her hands at his word. How can she keep up this pretence of normality any longer?

But there have been rumbles, amongst the doctors and staff, encouraging words. And the same from the God-Royal Alana as well, on her spaced-apart visits. Abigail's new strength can't go unnoticed from them, but the only way they know how to categorise it is through her healing. It fits the story they like to tell themselves, and so she goes along with it. She's eager, so eager, to run free.

That night, lighting fatty, spitting candles and chanting prayers, her God comes to her again.

He is a dark shape fitting through shadows, vast and encompassing. As he steps out from darkness the very walls shudder, reality warping, the ever-near otherworld of the forest gathering close. She can smell the sap of trees, the sharp sting of blood. An underlying richness like wine. His flat red eyes are warm on seeing her, and it's a warmth she steals crouched close at his feet.

"You shall leave this place tomorrow," he tells her, pulling her up to stand before him. "No more of this bowing Abigail. You are my Priestess, and there shall be others beneath you. Submission is their lot, not yours."

She nods, gazing at the unassuming shell he wears, remembering all she has done and all she knows she will do. Anything, for her God. Anything he wishes.

“Come.” A human-seeming hand strokes her hair. “There is something coming. We shall need to be prepared. There is work to do.”

The day after his meeting with Hannibal, Will walks into the morgue of the Quantico Building to find a God waiting for him.

His first instinct is to go very still. His next is to run away, but even half-paralysed by fear he can tell that would be a very bad idea indeed. Have they found him out? Have all the little half-clues of behaviour and body language combined to betray him to the unsympathetic powers of this world, and will he now be fated to a death both grisly and horrible?

“Good morning Will,” Jack Crawford says, nodding greetings to him, calm as if this is an everyday occurrence. Then turning back to the Royal; “Now that all the team is here we should be able to get this misunderstanding cleared up for you sir.”

“I understand completely,” the creature says, a smooth low roll like the purr of a big cat. Finding himself still alive and not currently arrested, Will gathers himself and takes stock. Is this beast looming so large really a pure Royal, now that he has time to analyse it? If not, then as close as makes little difference. Like Alana, perhaps, although in physiognomy they look nothing alike.

It has a masculine voice, so Will labels it tentatively male, albeit that such a distinction is more human than something that strictly maps onto the fluid forms of Gods. Metal, is the general impression he gets, looking it over now. Currently crouched forward on six main limbs, it might be bipedal if it had more space. Its hide gleams silver and bronze, muscle corded with visible weaving like wire. Smaller secondary limbs hang coiled and tense from its chest. The head is a heavy battering ram, horned with jagged outcroppings at utterly random angles, polished and grained like varnished wood. There are dark pits that suggest eyes, but it does not seem to possess a conventional sight.

Its attention is focussed on Jack. It does not appear to much care about Will, which is just the way he likes it, or indeed about any of the other members of the team. Beneath its notice, most likely.

“As you can now see,” it continues in that velvet rumble, “my papers are entirely in order. You understand it would not have been appropriate to leave such signs before the work was finished. The message could not be corrupted.”

There are documents laid out on the steel table, Will notices now. Thick rolls of parchment glowing with arcane and eldritch sigils, sickly red light spilling out where they are unrolled. He knows what they are. Swallows down a sudden rush of hate. Permission. Permission to kill, to mutilate, to violate, to do whatever the hell the God or semi-God wants to whomever weaker it wants. Numbers, well, what are numbers but tallied statistics of pain and evil? Will’s breath shudders in his throat.

Oh, he knows how much it happens. Has seen people taken, swept off the streets, particularly if they look lonely enough that no-one might object. It’s another thing to be confronted with the evidence of that which makes it all possible.

And even then it is better than the alternative. It is better than what came before.

“We’ll be in touch with Claims to have this marked down on your quota then sir,” Jack is saying, nodding and gingerly rolling the parchment up. The poisonous words crackle and hiss in the quiet. The creature takes its scrolls back, held carefully in the tentacle-wires nestled beneath its throat.

“I apologise for the inconvenience to your team.”

As it leaves, warping the reality of the door frames to let its bulk past, Will thinks it turns to look at him for a moment too long. He puts the thought from his mind quickly enough. That is the guilt and the fear speaking, not any rational supposition. He is beneath notice, just another cog in the wheels of the FBI. Or at least that is what he tells himself, what he hopes.

With that case no longer coming under their jurisdiction, the FBI moves onto other things, and Will returns to the usual set of his days. It should be restful, as much as it ever could be, but that last case nags at him, worries its way under his skin. The message was sent, a line of communication opened, and they have no real idea what it meant or what further action their near-God might be taking. Will is not particularly concerned with the victim, who was a thin-blood after all, and not human, but there’s still a callousness about the crime that disturbs him.

Clarification from Jack reveals the identity of the metallic beast. His true name is not pronounceable by a human throat, but Beverly recites it from the runes for him, three hollow knocks and the scrape of metal on metal; *Tok-tok-tok-schreeeeeeee*. He’s somewhat of a connoisseur amongst the Baltimore art scene, where favoured mortals call him Toviyah. Will looks it up. It means ‘the goodness of God’. The irony of it makes him want to take an iron hammer to the God’s skull, as though that would hurt it, powerful as it is, would do anything save get him killed.

Toviyah is a changer of shapes too, his multitude of subtly varying forms recorded in warped photographs and artists’ sketches of the society pages. The solid beast he wore in Quantico is a rare thing, perhaps more apropos of the violence and death that haunt their building than the beauty he must be more used to. An appearance commonly seen, at operas and gallery events and orchestral performances, is a sleek predatory shape suited to cutting through forest or water or air, streamlined and deadly. There are others; sometimes an almost human shape, an awful approximation of a thing that is horrible to look at.

If Will were to indulge some flight of fancy he would say here is an enemy fit for destruction, but that would be a task beyond him. He cannot touch a God. Not even the most ardent, fanatical Restorationist in all history has managed that. Some brief stab of arrogance and folly puts the thought into his head, as though the meeting was something out of fate rather than mere happenstance, and he is having a little trouble shaking it.

Will manages to leave the fruits of his pointless research to rot eventually, if not before several nights trying to glean some sort of meaning from their meeting. There are as yet no new cases, and if it were the Ripper whose attention was meant to be summoned by that soliloquy of blood and sinew, he has shown no sign of it that anyone can find. He should be relieved by that, and yet... Surely it can only speak of worse things to come. Such messages do not go well unanswered. Toviyah will try again, or when the reply does come it will be all the more grand and horrific for the delay.

Some days later, leaving the building after another afternoon giving lectures to the familiar round of students before they leave for winter break, Will is accosted by a man out by the parking lot who seems strangely familiar. He is chubby, somewhat sweaty and nervous, but well-dressed enough to be someone of means. He approaches in a conciliatory manner, all apologies and careful insistence. Will frowns at him, unsure what he wants, and displeased by the awkwardness of human contact.

“Franklin,” the man introduces himself, reaching out a hand but seeming mostly unbothered when Will doesn’t take it. “Franklin Froideveaux. An absolute pleasure to meet someone so... so unique!”

The smile Will manages in return is, he knows, a thing of bared teeth and warning. Nothing civil in it. “Have we met before?”

“Just in passing, once or twice,” Franklin replies. “We’re both patients of Hannibal.”

The memory coalesces with the prompting; although the office room has a separate entrance and exit for reasons of privacy, he had seen other humans on the steps up to that grand house, one of whom was indeed this man. But how had he known to come here, Will wonders, with sudden suspicion? Hannibal certainly wouldn’t have talked about him, a breach distasteful to his personal code, and the slight fame or infamy afforded Will by rags like the Tattler make no mention of the particulars of his schedule. To come to him now, here, at this particular time, requires a knowledge in depth enough to make him very uneasy.

“Why are you here?” he asks, cutting through whatever false-friendly small talk the other might have been attempting. Instinct prickles the back of his neck. Something stirs, cautious, with the odd sensation of movement inside his chest.

“Because you’re *special*,” Franklin says, with an intensity Will is liking less with every moment. “You’re human but he cares about you. He’s in hiding but you’ll draw him out! Then Toviya will have the answers he wants.”

Will is backing away, dread settling deep in his stomach. The empty coldness of the day stretches out around him, an expanse barricaded by the cars in the lot like steel palisades, blank windows mirroring movement, soft half-there shadows beneath each whispering danger with ghoulish fascination.

“He is here.”

There is an impression of metal unfolding. Of something dark and powerful at his back with the strength to paralyse him, unmoving, where he stands. Strong cords wrap around his limbs as Franklin watches, face wild, and mouths a chant in some select God-language he doesn’t understand. As he is drawn back, passing through and into a realm just a shadow’s distance away from his own, darkness overcomes him in slow stages, a deep drugged sleep as impossible to resist as the tides.

Will is woken by a bitter smell of burning. He becomes aware that he is lying on his side upon cold hard stone, in a place with little light save that which glows a short way away, pooling ruddy on the floor and spilling over the skin of his outstretched arm. A soft haze of smoke drifts past, lodging in the back of his nose and throat, acrid and unpleasant. He coughs. Something rumbles, hollow amusement.

“The mortal awakens.”

He recognises that deep purr. Had not heard it for long, but knows it all the same. Hard to forget something so dangerous. Toviyah. That God who killed to send a message. Who looked at him just a moment too long. Who has permits that even Jack’s borrowed legal authority cannot protect him from.

He curls in on himself in utter misery. There is a sound like metal scraping on rock, and a heavy, sharp-edged object is placed carefully over him. Will tenses. Knife-edged claws curl, bracketing him in a cage of steel, or whatever other unearthly alloy the creature’s body might be made up of. If he moves, surely he will be cut, sliced deep to bone.

“You shall not die yet,” Toviyah tells him, and the needle-points meet under him, scraping between cloth-over-flesh and stone beneath, lifting painfully. Will makes to move, to try and slip free, but meets an edge that neatly parts flannel and thick cloth with a whisper of pain quickly blooming with its sting. He halts and stills again, heeding the danger. Opens his eyes, at least. Better to see what doom is coming.

It is some cage or dungeon, which they inhabit but a corner of. Vast it gapes out behind the dull-shining beast he does not yet dare to look upon, and vast above, the crude-hewn walls tower. Paces away a brazier is burning, strewn with blackened herbs that are sending forth that unpleasant scent which woke him. Coals gleam red heat, whitened with ash. Their presence is a promise of pain that raises fear like bile. His mind is clamped hard down, all shields he has raised. Is that vulnerability known? Will that be the method by which his sanity and self are stripped from him?

“Unknowing pawn,” the God says, touching lightly at his chest, pricking through to skin. Will looks then. Takes him – it – in. Why does this bitter horror, this terror, feel so familiar? Why does he feel as though this is not the first time he has cowered in the presence of Royalty?

Toviyah wears a sleek-blade form. His greater limbs are each a crest of knives, spreading claws like a hawk’s talons. In place of eyes, carved balls of mahogany. His head like a jackal’s save the horns, placid as a statue of Anubis, though crocodile’s teeth jut from his jaws. A clutch of tail-limbs, held in together like the tentacles of a hunting squid, architeuthis that salt-deeps cousin of all Star-Born Blood.

“He’s had you forget,” the God says, in that low rumble. “Even now he dwells within you, maintaining his walls, washing those thoughts from your mind.”

Will has no idea what he is talking about. Not that he will voice such things, not wishing to rouse anger. Toviyah has whatever assumptions he has, and perhaps has taken him because of them, but without knowing details of what they are, refuting them may as easily end in death as freedom.

The Royal laughs again. His silver skin glows in the light. Some spots are dull with patina or as though fire-blackened. Observation of these little details is easier on Will’s mind than contemplation of the whole. “You say nothing mortal. It is wise not to anger me, but your words don’t matter. You are bait on the hook, nothing more. But we must waft the scent of that bait where it belongs, mustn’t we?”

Pain. It all comes down to pain, Will is aware of thinking, in that far off piece of his mind that is not occupied with screaming, with flaring neurones that fire stop stop stop in warnings that he’s powerless to heed. With this God and... the line of thought is tattered, trailing off into... lost but it goes somewhere, off into shadows like sinking behind a wall or... into ocean. Claws are carving

into his chest, piercing between ribs, gouging deep to eviscerate. It feels as though his very organs are wriggling around in there in a frenzy to escape. Toviya's maw is open as though to pant, with the scent of fresh blood and stress pheromones that must be seasoning the air, but what comes out is a solid thrum like a bow drawn across a cello. An echo of those hellish notes from an exposed inhuman throat.

The claws withdraw, taking with them a mess of something faintly twitching in their midst, slick with gore. Will gasps for air, aware he should be dead, should not still be breathing with his chest hollowed out and gone, ribs splintered into fragments that litter the ground. An eldritch power keeps him alive, in defiance of all natural rules of biology, and yet the experience is... familiar. His gaze is drawn to that dark mass.

A mass with eyes. A mass with torn, slender tendrils, a mass leaking ichor bright and green to mix the human coating of blood which covers it. A mass that had been *inside* him.

Toviya looks at the thing, impassive wooden gaze showing nothing, and tosses it on the fire.

The thing screams. It is a high-pitched wail, thin and tremulous, and Will cries out with a pang of shared feeling drawn out of him, a ghost of crisping hide that wavers across his skin without truly touching it. In its wake he feels... alert. Panicked. Terrified. And he remembers.



Sudden awakening from slumber of planning, as separate watcher-self is plucked from hollow cage of mortal flesh to wither unsustained and die in cleansing flame. Anger, woken rising deep and great, slow-burning ocean rush, welling through bone filling muscle, sinew, claws, teeth, throat. Stretched and bared and thirsting blood. Knowledge, in flood, bestowed unlooked for. First move made, but not anticipated. Not this. Violation of worshiper-theft, taboo for void-born kin lest provoking war.

Yet war is wanted here. Unavoidable conclusion. Not dance, seduction, close in and battle'd power 'til one devoured but grander thing, of Gods in strength in plain sight met. Hannibal snaps shut

teeth long-edged with urge to bite, with itch in jaws to fasten tight, to sink in deep and taste hot blood. Miscalculation, and now his prize his Prophet is taken.

Returned revenge to rain down upon this upstart. Futures warped by deity presence, no comfort there. Must trust to own strengths, to own powers kept low and burning strong, hidden twist walls of mortal world and mortal-seeming flesh. Abigail-Priestess and blood she sheds, wine of belief a secret source perhaps not yet known, not yet divined by enemy unmasked. Yet had meant to muster slow-gathered strength for coming strike, not spend it soon as he must now. Another way must be cut, carved. Found and summoned, from ritual, sacrifice, sacrament.

To Abigail he goes, dips through void-sea in paths outside her human world. Leaves off the self that hides, comes forth in all glory. Growls tidings through tight-fast control, casting mind through patterns, whirled lines of real and unreal, power and loci unspooled. There. Fastens in, found, curious confluence, potentiality unmoored.

Cannot move over-fast. Cannot let rage ride over reason. Never let fire penetrate chill of cold-salt blood yet, will not let it now even when insult so given to Will of fire's-kin. Preparations to be made. Force to be gathered. Then fall with wrath of stars on usurper, on thief, on challenger.

Lonely on a beach, a meat-born tower. Blood giving up blood. Mortals piled on mortals. Open offering, just waiting for claimant. Abigail borne in cup of claws through space-between to open sky and salt-spray and slick against midnight hide sweet as ancient home. Pale sand, water-wet. Thin boles of trees at back few fathoms off. Waves crash, endless harmony.

Old man crouched by pillar's base, teeth victorious bared, black devouring mass rotting in lungs, nibbling life away. Black stone altar set waiting, candles unlit, head-place unoccupied. Waiting. All waiting.

"What do you seek, elder mortal?"

Man looks up, sees Hannibal in glory before him. Shudders, joy passing, sparking flowering neurones in firework array. Abigail playing witness, silent, intense.

"My life's work." Memories, tender, juicy with death. Murderer. Kin-slayer. Ah, a truly worthy gift. "That bastard who stole my girl, all those fools and idiots too blind to see the power I had over them, and finally that little shit of a son who she would never admit was mine. Now I'm dying. Well, so what? Look what I've done with the years I had!" Wide expanse of gesture to totem behind, souls caught in web of ritual to rotting bones, wound tight with ley-line puissance. Knows his sacraments well, this mortal.

"A worthy monument," Hannibal comments, knowing it must be made his.

"All I want now is to be remembered for it. I figure of any creature, a God has the longest memory. That's my bargain. This feast, and me, if the memory of me lives on in you."

Pleasure at raw temerity shown in way of Gods, Hannibal nods, comes forwards for pact-words, for sealing deeds and such delights for so little a thing. Chose fate well, dying mortal man. To seal into story-of-life, of self-chronicle, but a thought and done. Laying frail body over small altar, thin paper-skin soon carved by claws, opened to heart, lungs smoke-black and poisonous. Breath a flutter, quieted. Slow seep of blood. Souls, power, a vortex swallowed down, gulped energy-full. A glorious shining moment, monument to years, pulsing beneath invigorated flesh.

“Will it be enough?” Abigail asks.

“Not yet.” A truth unpleasant no less true. “We must gather more before the time comes.”

Satisfied with his piece of impromptu surgery, Toviyah had carefully closed Will back together, coaxing muscle and bone and skin to meld and heal in a mockery of human biology. Caught up in memories months suppressed, only now able to process, he had barely noticed. The pain had been distant, foreign. The pain that dwelt in his mind, the betrayal, the horror, the violation, had been fresh and new and the more compelling. Chest puckered now with pale scars, Will had been carried off into the dark expanse of the hall, away from the dim light and choking smoke, to be stuffed into some small carved cage in the murky depths.

The God had left him then, and curled about himself Will had tried to deal with the revelation of the truth.

It hurts. There's too much of it. No order. Just terrible things, terrible sights, horrors in the night and deadly gifts and manipulation and lies. How can he rank what's worst? Hannibal is a monster clothed in the flesh of a man. A better camouflage than anything Will has ever seen. He fed him *human meat*. How could he have been foolish enough to accept a gift from a stranger, especially a gift of food? He'd fallen right into the trap of that pact, and if ever he had a hope of escaping this, it vanished a long time ago. His soul hasn't been his own in months.

And what he'd said. Those whispers. Promises. Prophet. Potential. Will doesn't want to know what Hannibal intends for him, what warped role he'd have him slip into. That's not him. That's not his life. None of this... none of this... Gods, everything he's always been terrified of, and it's happened without him even noticing it.

So long fearing his abilities would take away his humanity, and he's had a part of a God lurking inside his chest for weeks.

Hannibal knows what he's done. That he killed Silvestri... that he fantasises about killing Elder-kin. He knows. Why is Will even still alive? Why is he not in agony in a torture-pit somewhere? That he isn't in some ways makes this worse. Because it just means Hannibal has better uses for him. Crueller uses, perhaps. Who knows? He's a Royal. Motives impenetrable.

He'd said he could understand. Said he fantasised about killing his kin too. The laugh Will lets out is a fractured, ghastly thing. The apex predator, pretending merely fantasies.

And hiding himself, what he is. Why? Not just for Will's benefit, surely. No-one else had seemed to know the truth either. It's impossible that everyone he knows, that he's ever met, could be in on it. It's not just a lie that Will has been buying.

And Abigail is in his power. No. No, she's fallen under his aegis as well, ever since that day in Hobbs' kitchen. He'd known even then the dangers she'd be in, much as Hannibal had made his own mind repress them. Had reacted internally with horror, but he had dismissed it, done nothing and now for all that they are both her guardians. Hannibal has been visiting her at the hospital, the two of them alone. What has happened there? What terrors, what abominations, has he been subjecting her to?

Will could be sick. Maybe he will be sick. Maybe he'll tilt his head back and choke himself on it, escape the mockery that's been made of his life that way, suffocate on bitter poisonous rage.

It's so dark in here.

The chasm of it opens up around him, thin bars little protection. It is gaping and empty, and he is so very, very alone. A pawn, shoved around, kidnapped by a God to spark some game or war or rivalry against another God. His life no longer his own. His body no longer his own. His mind invaded, moved around. Not even that remains to him. He's a hollow empty shell, a puppet made to walk and talk at an inhuman monstrosity's command.

He realises he's crying. Dull wet sobs, muffled by the blanket of heavy night that envelops everything. Walls too far for echoes or acoustics. Miserable nothing piled atop miserable nothing, and anger deep beneath it all, worsened by powerlessness.

He's going to die down here.

Toviyah comes back. How long it's been Will doesn't know. Hunger is beginning to gnaw at his ribs, and his thirst has only been alleviated by licking droplets of condensation and mineral damp from the bars of his cage. He hears the signs of him from far off, clicking metal claws over the stone, sounds spreading a little way before they are deadened by the heaviness of this place. A human voice with him, very faint but coming closer, muttered words he can't make out.

Franklin. Will levers himself up until his back is resting against a pillar of stone, damp against his bare skin. The God had made a ruin of his shirt, digging that abomination out of his chest, and now the scraps of cloth remaining aren't even enough for warmth. This cave though is not chill enough for it to much matter. What is the odd shiver, when he has problems much worse?

"There's been no sign of him yet," Franklin, that traitor to humanity, is saying. Will narrows his eyes at the darkness, staring out to see any sign of them. Toviyah likely needs no light, but the same is not true for his pet. And... yes, there. The hint of a flame, a beam of light directed down at the ground from a lantern, wavering with the motions of walking. "Nothing by any kind of scrying. I thought he'd come faster, I really did!"

The God makes no reply. It's a surprise to Will, felt dully through despair and exhaustion, that he lets his slave have as much freedom of speech as he does. It's possible he does not feel the irritation Will would at the chatter. Although he would be willing to admit his own derision biased. The man had turned him over to this Royal. He's not some mind-washed, servile thing either, not yet. He had a choice. Perhaps he is being unfair. Impossible to go against the wishes of a God who holds you in their power, after all, but his bitter thoughts will not be thus allayed.

Toviyah comes now before Will's cage. The lantern lets Will see a little more clearly the dimensions of it. It might have been metal once, but long ages of calcific drip from whatever lies so far above has covered it, a shaped stalagmite. The low ceiling would not allow him to stand even if he'd had the strength to. There is no obvious aperture through which his semi-conscious body might have been placed, or extracted now.

"This waiting is dull, is it not," Toviyah says, with warmth almost conspiratorial. He moves, and his anatomy appearing from wire woven now unweaves. He comes apart, in reaching forward,

disrupted by stone, and plucks Will up with a grip fastened around his neck. Will struggles through instinct, panicking, half-choking.

The moment of actually passing through the cage is confused and distorted, but then he is dumped onto smooth rock, gasping for air. The Royal nudges his limp limbs into some other configuration more pleasing. Then another. Toying with him.

“Human forms are akin to instruments,” Toviyah muses, leaning his weight down onto Will’s right forearm. The sound of bone snapping is swallowed up by the empty air, but the scream of pain that he cannot hold back rips it open, to the God’s evident pleasure. “Their throats make music, and their bodies, and after they are dead even the parts of them, if treated with care.”

More agonising pressure further up that limb, bone splintering again, another cry impossible to suppress. Tears of rage and hate and pain fill Will’s eyes, make his throat tight. Not tight enough. He yowls, he whimpers, he makes whatever noises the God wants him to make with its carefree application of force and the knives of its body. It continues for some time, pain upon pain, inescapable, a kind of high whine that fills his head with its noise, blots out all else, forces his awareness into the heavy cage of his own body. The animal functions of his instincts obey their fearsome tormentor, without recourse to higher function. There is no higher function, for this long space of existence.

There is movement, and the agony slackens a little, movement and the impression of words, and an easing that makes conscious breathing and thought possible again. The light flickering over his closed eyelids begins to dim, heading further away. Carefully he lies where he has fallen, inflating his lungs, luxuriating in the uncomplicated rise and fall of his chest. He hurts all over, but it no longer feels like the murderous torment of any serious injuries. Bruising mostly, probably. Hard to take stock, feeling so drained, and sore, and played out.

Will does not feel any kind of shame for giving the God what pleasure it wanted in the reactions it forced out of him. He is human, and all humans break like that, no matter who they are or how strong. That is just the constraints of how they are all made, and why they make such good prey. If they were not so easy to torture, Royalty would not have so much fun. At least whilst they remain amusing, they remain alive. Until it goes too far. Will knows this is just the beginning. There will be a lot more of this to come, and what’s the point in trying to stick to some notion of strength when it will be torn from him one way or the other in the end?

Back in the early days of their Rule, societies had tried different ways of dealing with their conquerors. Some, perhaps the wisest, had submitted from the very first. Those in the deep forests of the continental north, or past that narrow isthmus into the great river valleys and massive jungles beneath the equator, enough of them had beheld in awe and terror and perhaps found some elements of their own religions to place these new Gods in as a sop to their populace and though it had been a perversion their cultures had survived. Those folk of the plains, of the deserts, of the lesser woods, had seen horror and what was beginning to be done to them and fought back. They had died, perished in bravery, in the knowledge that they were doing the right thing. A pattern repeated over the globe entire, the impossible choice of capitulation or genocide.

Death is not an option here. Will hasn’t the strength to do it to himself, and Toviyah is waiting for something that may or may not ever come before he will offer that release. There will only ever be the pain, until at last he loses all he is and ever was.

He hasn’t the moisture in his system to cry again, no relief of stress to be found there.

Nothing but despair. Nothing.

Abigail has never before been frightened of her God, but now there is a cold, coiled rage to him that, although it is never directed at her, yet catches her in its radiance enough to chill her down to her bones. He is detached in his anger, barely sparing her a glance, attention fixed at some distant point, on the one that has been lost to them. Temporarily, only temporarily, she tells herself. She isn't fond, exactly, of Will Graham. More ambivalent about him. But he is part of their still-evolving Holy Family, and it offends her that another God has taken him.

Hannibal seems to have specific destinations in mind. That tower of bodies by the shore, the offering of a lifetime that she is quite in awe of. It's far beyond her own ambition, at least as she is. Perhaps a time will come when she will offer up her own monuments, the sweating work of days and months and years, personalised deaths, ritual meanings, telling a story just for them, but that is a long way off. They have to quest after other sources of power right now.

They walk the dark paths. Abigail's mortal mind is not able to truly perceive them as they are, but she endures long moments, stretched ages, of heat and ice and night and something too bright to be day. She endures pressure, and its lack aching in her ears, popping with a wiggle of her jaw. She endures the faint images of stars, lonely wastes without weight. Hannibal carries her carefully, clutched close to dry, cool skin.

They pass through; she steps out into a small room with one wall glass. There is a single occupant, aside from herself. Her God rises up from the space of the floor as though rising from the sea, concrete crumbling to sand trickling off him. The rest of him spreading like a stain to cover walls and ceiling until all is encompassed within him, a pocket of his body. Abigail finds her feet, unsteady with the return to the real.

"Now who are you?" the prisoner asks. He's not tall, but solid, with a ginger pelt of short fur, large hands with surprisingly delicate fingers. He is very still. Emotions mix on his face. Awe, and curiosity, and perhaps the slightest lick of fear. Abigail doesn't blame him, even if he is a Godling. Hannibal is deserving of all of that.

"You should know that Dr Gideon," Hannibal replies. "You have used my name as if it were your own."

"The Ripper." Now rapturous, overwhelmed with a kind of relieved joy. Abigail watches him curiously. She remembers the stories they'd told about him. Lies spread in the papers, though she'd not more than suspected at the time. The quick sinking of that tale, never followed up, had made that much clear. But she hadn't known that her God has been hunting under that name. That Copycat of Will's, yes, but this is new information. So many names, her God. So many layers under which his true self hides. She smiles.

"Belief, Gideon," Hannibal is saying. "You truly believed, and were believed in turn."

"I hear I've Dr Chilton to blame for that," Dr Gideon says, with almost friendly malice. "He took my head apart. Moved all the furniture around."

"Come and have your revenge," Hannibal says, shadows parting with gentle water ripples. The Void gapes. A passage out, an escape. There's a pattern here that Abigail isn't seeing. A weight of ritual. A hum in the air of gathering power, familiar now, even to her muted mortal senses.

“And then you’ll tell me who I really am?”

“You must play the Ripper one last time.” Even Abigail knows that’s not an answer, but it seems Dr Gideon is too eager to see that. He steps forwards, trusting, into that piece of eternal night. It twists and swallows him up, and her God clasps her tight to him again. They sink, down beneath the world she knows, past all protections, wards, the fierce barriers of iron.

This knight’s move is short. A small jump, to rise in another occupied room, whose single inhabitant turns to see them with surprise and sudden terror. Opens his mouth to speak and shadows rise. He is engulfed, lost to some internal space or stomach, imprisoned. Then a flick, like diving, and they are gone again.

True sleep isn’t possible under the conditions of his confinement, but Will manages occasionally to doze. It is no indicator of the passage of time. Whatever sense of that his body might have retained, he has the feeling time does not apply here, not in the sense he is used to. He is not fed, or given water, but each time Toviyah comes to him, in the healing afterwards hunger and thirst are also swept away. A pitiful thing to be thankful for, but he’ll take what he can get.

In what might tentatively be called night, in the fits and turns that are not truly sleep, he still dreams. Whispers reach him, murmurs and the ghosts of laughs passing through the weight of the dark to brush against the stone bars of his cage. Hooves, hitting rock with a measured light ‘*tak*’ for each step. He shifts, trembling but unable to move, already knowing what it is that comes for him. The warmth of its breath, prickling over his skin. The impossible impression of mass, that no logical sense should be able to perceive. Then that snout, reaching down. Brushing at first cool and damp, then leaving a fever-tingle in its wake. Nuzzling him, he falls deeper, the echoes of the aches in the real gradually diminishing as it pulls him down.

Gradually Will loses the experience of weight. Stone melts away, into mist, into less than mist. The most dim pricks of light start to fill the air, gathering more in number until he perceives their truth; the map of the stars. A great swathe across the sky, the belt of the galaxy, an arm whose constituent parts are unnumbered, although not numberless. It is silent here, where sounds have nothing to carry them. Silent and eternally peaceful. From earth, unchanging, trapped in a singular moment, a moment of the Gods’ triumph. From this perspective here... Here he is given sight to see what once was, when the stars still danced.

The planet is a ball beneath him sparkling with the lights of cities, and over it hangs the moon, and yet all colourless, all pale, even the far-off sun burning away in the corner of his eye. Theirs is a slow waltz through the heavens, and as he watches the dance gains a speed to make it visible to him. With the flickering quality of film, the earth spins, the moon encircles, and gradually he is drawn out on a pathway towards other bodies.

Distance becomes small between the siblings of their system, graceful lines of orbits and parabolas, ordered patterns working upon their own timescales in sync with the movement of the greater whole. Mystery and awe meet knowledge not his own in his head. He sees as Gods must see, in ways their own, in ways with the dim shudder of familiarity not long last felt in horrid moments, when the whole world and his perception of it was equations and angles and vectors. This time it does not hurt him. This time it has been softened, and his mortal mind can encompass it.

Gravity has a greater weight than gaps of space between, so he might see the nine together, not as dim lights in each others’ skies. Here is Mars, atmosphere that ought be red with dust save for this

leaching of all colour. Here the belt of rock that sits a boundary, and great dark shapes moving, dreaming, within it; Gods yet in slumber, who woke once and now for a time have returned, preferring their sleep to simple questions of power. Here the giants, gaseous, and their many moons, each holding wonders and terrors. There are things about them that Will is not meant to know, yet unlooked-for that knowledge comes. Ancient life in ancient waters, old cultures once ruled as humanity is now ruled, passed from history, diminished and gone. Saturn with her rings and beasts the size of lesser planets cavorting between both as a seal between land and sea.

The sun diminishes behind. Cosmic rays are spread and thin, less easy to manoeuvre. Neptune and Uranus, in their vast orbits. The far-off stars are brighter here. The expanse of space is lonely, and cold, and the gap beyond gapes anew. There is one last stop before the system's end. That tiny planet Yuggoth, of whose existence he should have no kenning. Inhabited still, a slow and icy war enfolds it, for here is defiance, and some little step of power to back it up. Yet were it not so small, so isolated, the Gods might have thrown it down to burn and re-woken still-sleeping kin within its frigid pits.

Something would have him know all this. To what end he is less certain. What good does it do him, to have seen the music of the spheres as it once was, a thousand years ago which is but a blink on these such greater scales? There is no help for human-kind out here. It is vast, and unending, and utterly uncaring. There are no greater intelligences to call on for help but the Gods they already know. Only the Void, which is above everything, and too vast for one small planet and one small people whose history is as seconds upon the eternal calendar. And visions it might give – and perhaps he has it to thank for this one – are the random oscillations of fate and chance.

The course that has been plotted by whatever force is behind the genesis of this now begins to arc back round. With grace through the heavens, Will's path starts its return to Earth, to his corporeal body that he's sure still sleeps in the chthonic cavern wherein the God resides. There is a beauty here, in the silent dark, in the dance, and he is heedful of it. Perhaps this is no more than some solace, simple ease, to turn back the pain that haunts him mind and body. If so he can be thankful for it. And yet it feels more complex, with motive yet indiscernible behind it all.

Nothing he might uncover now, he knows that much. Better to simply lie back, let it sweep over him, and be lulled by the unchanging, the eternal... at least as it pertains to his scale. In quiet contemplation, he can find some peace.

They emerge in the forest, but only halfway. The vision of trees and shadows is superimposed, Abigail finds, on the expanse of a curved dome, on white sheets and a massive cylinder whose purpose she cannot divine in the dark. Abel Gideon is waiting for them, eager, straining towards the point of their arrival. Hannibal drops their other acquisition at his feet; the man rolls with the motion, scrabbling to get away. Dr Gideon is on him with Godling speed, kicking him over onto his back, kneeling with one curled limb pressed to his chest so he cannot run, can barely breath. He's a slender, supercilious, oily sort of individual, their newcomer, with a neat beard, well-dressed and carefully arranged. Another Godling, actually, she sees, when a tail comes snaking out between his thighs, and a forked tongue wets his lips.

"Gideon," the thin-blood says, sounding nervous. "What a... surprise... to see you."

"Yes, last we saw each other I was locked up in that lovely little cell of yours," Abel Gideon replies, with that pleasant drawl not hiding the menace beneath. Abigail is content to watch, at the

shoulder of her God, as this plays out. “But now the *real* Ripper’s let me out to play, and you *have* been naughty Dr Chilton.”

This Chilton’s eyes flick over to the form that lurks, contented, in the shadows. She sees the fear that’s been woken in him. “No, you’re not the Ripper, Gideon,” he says carefully. “But I was only trying to help you. I shouldn’t have let you convince me...”

“None of that!” Gideon snaps, cutting him off with a hand around his throat. “No more lies from you. I know the truth now. You got inside my mind Fredrick. Now I’m going to return the favour.”

Chilton’s suit-jacket is unbuttoned with one hand, the waistcoat after. The material of his shirt is parted with a single jerk, the noise of tearing, buttons springing loose to hit the floor with shallow tings and roll away. The Godling’s chest and belly are smooth, with fine scales like a lizard, hued slightly green. Sharp, frightened breaths move his ribs in jerks.

One of Hannibal’s tentacles reaches over to Abigail, holding a knife. It’s not the one she’s used to using, that sleek, stained stone, but a cold iron blade. She can see it burning slightly against his midnight skin, with the faintest tinge of smoke. It doesn’t seem to bother him much, but then he is a God. He has passed through the point of vulnerability out to greater strengths. She takes it, and he nudges her towards the tableau playing out short meters away.

Abigail does as she’s told. Proffers the blade. Abel Gideon turns to look at her with curiosity, still holding his adversary down by the throat. He cocks his head, observing, calculating. He’s cautious, which is understandable, and wise. He notices what still adheres to the hilt, the faint scent of charcoal about it. He uses his teeth to tear a strip of fabric from the discarded shirt to wrap it before he takes it.

“You’re an interesting girl, aren’t you,” he says. “I’d always suspected the Ripper worked alone, but why wouldn’t he want worshipers? I would – I did. But that’s... all over now. This is a very fine blade.” It’s a very quick change of subject. Dr Gideon tests it out, drawing sharp edges over Dr Chilton’s chest. It leaves lines of muddy ichor, and screams, in its wake. “You know Frederick, this one last kill of mine should be *worthy* of the Ripper. After all, he’s watching. I think he’d appreciate a gift basket, don’t you?”

That terror for his life now turns to pleading, if in an aggressive, bitter sort of way. He must have been a proud man before all this, Abigail thinks, if he doesn’t even know how to beg properly.

“Stop this,” Chilton yells, head turned towards Hannibal in the shadows. “Stop *him* damn you! You don’t even need this! You call this a sacrifice? You’ll get nothing out of this, *nothing!*”

Hannibal clicks his tongues. “Rude,” he observes. Abigail agrees. Frederick might be one of the Blood, but she doesn’t like him much. Doesn’t like Dr Gideon much either, but that has more to do with the insult he offered to her God, accidental and manipulated or not.

“I’m going to enjoy the look on your face as I get inside your belly,” Gideon says, and starts to cut. The air is quickly rent with screaming, with a particular resonance from an inhuman throat. Now that their false Ripper, their true sacrifice, is occupied, Hannibal begins to walk a circle around them, nudging draped equipment aside where it’s necessary. The claw of one free limb dangles down, scraping a line into the concrete which will join perfectly with their point of origin. Abigail watches what he does, the words he speaks, the echo and reverberation of his will exerting itself on mortal reality that she is barely trained to be able to perceive.

The collection of organs soon slopping out onto the floor is varied, made more so by the inherently interesting anatomy of their donor. Abigail counts kidney, what might be spleen, lengths of bowel like coiled serpents, gallbladder, and some other things that she just doesn't recognise. She's become familiar enough with what lies inside a human over the past weeks, carving up sacrifices, the repeated motions of butchery that used to be comforting, before. Are becoming comforting again. Chilton is growing very pale. It's not blood-loss – the knife cauterises where it cuts – but most likely just the touch of unchanging, earth-born iron.

"He had a point though," Abigail says tentatively, as they wait for Chilton to die. "You're a God. You're so powerful. Why do you need any of this?"

"These licks of power are the pebbles to tip the scales," Hannibal replies. "This is too important to be left to chance."

Finally what's left of the ruined thin-blood slips away, and Dr Gideon stands, breathing elevated with excitement and maybe relief, arms wet to the elbow with ichor. "Does it please you?" he asks, turning to face Hannibal. There's something desperate about him. Longing.

"It does."

"Good." Gideon closes his eyes. "Good. Now you'll tell me who I am?"

"You're the one too many think the Ripper." When he strikes, it is very quick. A lash of tongues, like a whip, and a puncture mark, and what must be a swiftly growing paralysis, because as Gideon topples his eyes are still moving. Hannibal stalks over to him. "I don't mean to make this a quick death."

Abigail watches the rest of the ritual very carefully. She doesn't want to miss a thing. She might be called upon to carry it out herself one of these days.

Each source of power devoured eager wriggling under skin. Want and need to be used, potentialities reacting to own emotion, to planned unleashing. With false-Ripper-self's blood under teeth and warm in belly, no more time left to pass before becomes too late. Must move now, and wreak war and vengeance upon this newest thief.

Watcher-self long dead but marks way still, eidolon of memory outside of time, long twisting road to secret place lit up true. Abigail taken again into embrace of claws, lee of own form protection from harsh winds of Void-Sea Beyond. Stalks the path laid out before them, cold rage burning motivation, teeth claws all sharp, all waiting blood-thirsty. Challenger shall not see self coming. Lurks now in space outside of folded space, of dimension, demesne, place of power. Looks, and sees. Prophet-Will in cage dreaming. Rival-God approaching, cloaked in darkness. Left human pet behind this time. That traitor's death shall later come.

True nature resides outside of dimensions and petty rules of mortal plane, defying mass and physics, size both vast and minuscule, extruded as wished. Now sets Priestess down in darkness unobserved by edge of cavern and stretches, slinks, encompasses slick rock overhead in great carpet of roiling self. Waiting. He comes.

Moment crystallises. Release and falls, gravity restored. Claws slice metal as meat, teeth carve deep in towards amorphous heart. Cold sea-fire licking over all, lighting dome above, self's slick

hide, reflecting silver. Screeches from immortal throat. Damage done, but battle just begun. Other grows, metal knits, wires ropes tendrils all to loop and strangle and cut. Wrestling now, jaws locked, pain of each irrelevant.

Have not fought this way in vast ages of universe. (Most recent circumstance of comparison was without opportunity, revenge still awaiting.)

Too much of equals, unsubtle unlike true War-In-Heavens but duel of Gods tremendous in any form. Fighting with strength of stars, twist in out in through what is real and back, flailing limbs gaining purchase, thrown off, constricting that which disappears soon as thought. Ichor flows, splashes, drowns rock beneath ignored. Minds clash with minds beyond physical. Bite, tear, feed. Powered by souls eons old.

No doubt in outcome. Doubt lethal. Only will, fortitude, vitality. The puissant self, unbowed, the conqueror.

Abigail creeps across the rough ground, careful to be as soundless as possible. Above she has no sense of where her God has gone, lurking, awaiting the moment. She only knows her target, his presence made clear to her in a gift of eldritch sight and understanding. Not permanent, for even now it burns her eyes and takes its toll upon her mind, but it is necessary in this utter pitch. The other God must be around here too, but she cannot worry about that. She will take care of her part in this, and Hannibal will destroy the one who has stolen from him just as he destroyed the Godling-thief but a little while before.

The cage is near when her God makes his move. He is fire, and wrath, and power, massive and incomprehensible to look upon, encompassing vastness. Something flashes metallic in the midst of him, and then becomes... more. A new colossus, bestriding the gap of this cave. She watches, entranced, as limbs and tentacles roil, making painful patterns, looping in and through and about in impossible fashions. It is hideous, and beautiful, and she doesn't want to look away but she knows she must. She has a job to do.

Tearing herself from the glory of the Gods, Abigail sprints now to the low-set mess of bars before her. Will is there within it, sitting up, eyes wide, staring at the war still raging and muttering something to himself. He looks wild. Wilder than she has ever seen him. His hair is a mess tangled and matted with blood. He is bare-chested, marred with scars, thinner than mere days ought to have made him, as though unnatural means have burned through stores of fat and muscle. He looks like a hermit, an ascetic. He looks like the Prophet he is destined to become. Abigail approves.

"Hey!" she shouts at him, hardly worrying they will attract attention. "Hey, Will!"

He turns, pulled away as the direction of his gaze is the last to go. He blinks at her, bemused, processing. "Abigail..?"

"Do you know how I can get you out of this thing?" she asks.

"You shouldn't be here." There is something about him not entirely all there. This is hardly the time for him to be struck with holy madness, Abigail thinks, exasperated. She stretches a hand through the bars, beckoning.

Above, the howling of battle is only growing. It is thunder, and crashing waves, and the ululations of a thousand beasts. One cannot be distinguished from the other.

“Come here at least,” she says, and is rewarded when he shuffles over, forced to move on his knees by the close roof, to grasp her roughly. He looks at her carefully and calmly, assessing.

“You feel real,” he says, quietly. “I don’t generally touch... well. Only the stag.”

There’s no visible way in, no obvious way out. The cage is heavy stone, part of the floor, and the spaces are thin. She can’t put her arm in past the elbow for fear of getting stuck. Frustrated, she tugs, and Will lets his hand come with her until their position is reversed, until he is reaching out. Did Hannibal truly mean her to get their Prophet free, or just to keep him safe until the other deity was dead?

They remain, huddled together, as the Gods rage overhead, awaiting the finale. Metal scrapes with horrid screeches, there are growls and roars that shake the floor, bass beyond bass, vibrating through the bones of her chest. Pools of ichor are visible on the stone where the light of witch-flame falls, thick and emerald, shining with their own phosphorescence. It is impossible to tell how long the war lasts. Time here is as time in the forest; malleable, stopped and started and passing in ways that confuse the very body. Clocks paused.

At last the cacophony of vicious sound begins to lull. What movement can be seen becomes calmer. Vast silver limbs become slack, hitting the ground with heavy thuds, still twitching, coiling gently but without purpose. Hannibal comes more into the reality of this dimension. His head is buried deep in what might be a chest – some similar structure – muzzle green and dripping down his neck, ripping out chunks of wired flesh with tearing-steel shrieks, devouring. He is not uninjured, she sees; his pitchy hide scored deep in many places, but even now starting to slowly heal.

“This is actually real, isn’t it,” Will Graham says, from the other side of the bars. He sounds... scared. Slightly sick. Angry. “Outer Gods, I recognise him now.”

“You didn’t think we’d leave you here did you?” Abigail asks. “You’re one of us.”

Will closes his eyes. Swallows visibly. Choked with emotion?

“At least we’re both still sane,” he says, very quietly.

“More interesting without being gifted, apparently,” Abigail sighs. She’d asked, once, but her God seems unique in this, as with so many other things. Not that she would ever complain, not when she’s been so lucky to be Chosen at all.

Will turns away slightly, leaning back against the side of the cage, still holding on very tight to her hand. He looks tired; she can hardly blame him after everything that’s happened. They have to keep on waiting anyway, for Hannibal to finish and come break the stone. The consumption of the other God might take a while – it’s important though. Even now Abigail can see the raw edges of the gaping wound trying vainly to join up, little filaments of metal wriggling into the space between.

Bit by bit, the usurper vanishes into the maw of her God.

Once the last of it is gone, Hannibal begins to fold himself up, shrinking down to a size more appropriate for interacting with humans. He looks sleek and satisfied, no longer bearing any signs of the previous battle. Not even scars remain.

He approaches, the one bright thing in the black depths, looking them over, their clasped hands, the stone cage, Will thin and wild. She can feel the tension of him where they touch. Hannibal gestures to the bars, and the very shadows move, writhing over rock and leaving absence where they pass. Such a casual application of power. It brings a smile to Abigail's face. Her God is a great God, vast and eternal, and she is Chosen of him.

"Will," he says. "You remember."

A monster is looking at him fondly. Will knows how he would normally be reacting to this – if any such circumstance might be called normal – but there is a great hollow numbness in the centre of him that won't entirely register the sight before him. He'd thought it unreal at first. Another Void-born vision. He had not thought Hannibal would come for him, but he should have known he would not escape that easily. Not through death, not through the machinations of some other deity. That's what it is to be owned, and owned he surely is. The mark of the beast placed upon, inside, him.

Did Toviyah get what he expected? Had he considered the possibility of losing the confrontation he'd gone so far to provoke? If he had been able to see this outcome, would he have left things alone? Would it have been better for Will if he had? He would not know the truth, but that might be for the better, all things considered. The price for this knowledge was too high.

"Yes," he replies, through a throat harsh from screaming and dehydration. "All the lies you've told, all the tricks, manipulation..."

"Not quite how I would have intended it, but perhaps it is for the best," the abomination says. "You have grown in strength, Will. The weight of all you are, and all you might be, all the three of us might be, presses into reality. This is the only true path. You cannot run from this. It will only make it worse."

A shocked little laugh is startled from his lips. "And do I have any *choice* in the matter?"

"Of course." That small smile, just edging up the corners of a too-huge mouth, is so very familiar. "Your choice is in the nature of how this comes about. Of your life, or your death. Of exile, or remaining a part of the mortal world. Of hate, or love."

"Outer Gods, *love!*" Will can hardly believe what he's hearing as numbness begins to be thawed by a vicious anger. "Can you think after all of this that love has any part in *anything*?" He can see Abigail's expression as he says those words, see how she frowns at him, opens her mouth as if to object. Yet she says nothing. This is between Will and the God, he recognises. That is what the both of them want.

"It may come, in time," Hannibal tells him. "Paths lie open. For you, I have left them open."

It horrifies him. That so confined, so limited a choice is seen as mercy, as a kindness, and may actually be so by the standards of his kind. What does Will really know of how Royalty treats its pets? He sees the outcomes, shells, shattered minds, empty minds, twisted bodies, mutations and reshaping and fanatics. Causes, day to day lives... those are private mysteries.

"What do you want of me?" he asks, in despair.

“For my Prophet at my side,” says the God. “To kill Thin-bloods and Godlings in my name. To learn rituals, the ways that through my power you might manipulate this world to our benefit.”

“Did you see through me from the very beginning?” Will asks, scraped raw and hurting by the words of the monster before him. Uncovering more emotion beneath ice. “Know what I’d wanted for so many years?”

“From the moment Jack Crawford spoke your name to me I knew this must come to pass,” Hannibal replies.

Will feels his face twist with the bitterness of it. The inevitability. The open trap, the pitfall of fate, of chance, of perhaps many small coincidences in his life that all led up to the moment Jack took on the Hobbs case and went to this creature, all unsuspecting. “So I never really had a chance.”

“No,” Hannibal says, considering. “This is as it ever would be.”

Will manages to pull himself to his feet, at last. Works his hand free from where Abigail still absentmindedly grips it, and steps carefully out through the space the shadows ate in the bars of his cage. He rubs a grimy hand over his eyes. He is tired, deathly so. After all this, he feels weak and washed-out, fragile as fine china. As though a single blow would shatter him now into a thousand pieces. His own rage licking at paper-thin barriers, so easy to give in to and undoubtedly to be smacked down with ludicrous ease. The walls in his mind are thinned, gossamer panels pasted in layers. What is at the core of them? The core of him? He no longer knows.

“What now?” he asks.

“You’ll return home. To those hounds, to Jack and Quantico. Our sessions will continue, although the content will change.”

“What if I tell them what you are? You have to be hiding for a reason. Perhaps that would be enough for you to leave me alone.”

“William.” Gently chiding. “Your words will turn to dust in your mouth.”

Will swallows the scream that threatens to rise in his throat, nothing but anger and helplessness. He is trapped, utterly. No matter the hollow fear, horror, revulsion, none of it will help him. There is no escape.

Hannibal comes closer, the unearthly shape of him making Will’s skin crawl. He is stuck in place, until cool tentacles snake out from the darkness to wrap around his waist. He tries to shy away then, but too late. He is pulled in close, towards the copper-frankincense-salt stink of the God. Abigail too, stepping forward willingly, rolling her eyes at him.

Shadows open up around them. They are engulfed. The Void whispers, and the hell of Toviyah’s cave melts away as they move from world to world.

Will is let loose in his own house, stumbling onto the rug, blinking back darkness from his eyes as his dogs leap up and mill around him excitedly. He falls to his knees amongst them, clutching their warm furry bodies to him, muffling his furious cry of rage against their sides. A long and unknown future stretches out before him, and he can see no way out of it.

He is Chosen now. Chosen and doomed in one.

“All returns to the right path.” God-stuff yet digesting inside, rendered to raw, rebuilding in own image and returning strength to strength, all is well. Prophet found, confronted, knowing now his fate and destiny, fear-hate-despair so sweet to taste. Shudders, ripples from battle echoing in greater world-substance, but without markers of Name to raise attention unwanted. Paths of future now unclouded, showing what-is-wished falling into place.

“Yet it all could have come to ruin,” Bedelia warns. Sitting contained, ever-watchful, beast behind mask unseen. “Take care for your arrogance.”

Amusement. “Do I not have cause to be arrogant?”

“Other eyes are watching. They will start to see your pattern.”

“By the time the confrontation presents itself, we shall be ready.” This is knowledge and confidence. Deaths, rituals, powers, and then to win the return of what is his.

“For your sake, I hope that’s true.”

“It will be.”

---- *fin, for now* ----

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